Isaac Asimov: Down the Electron Stream

# Fantasy & Science Fiction

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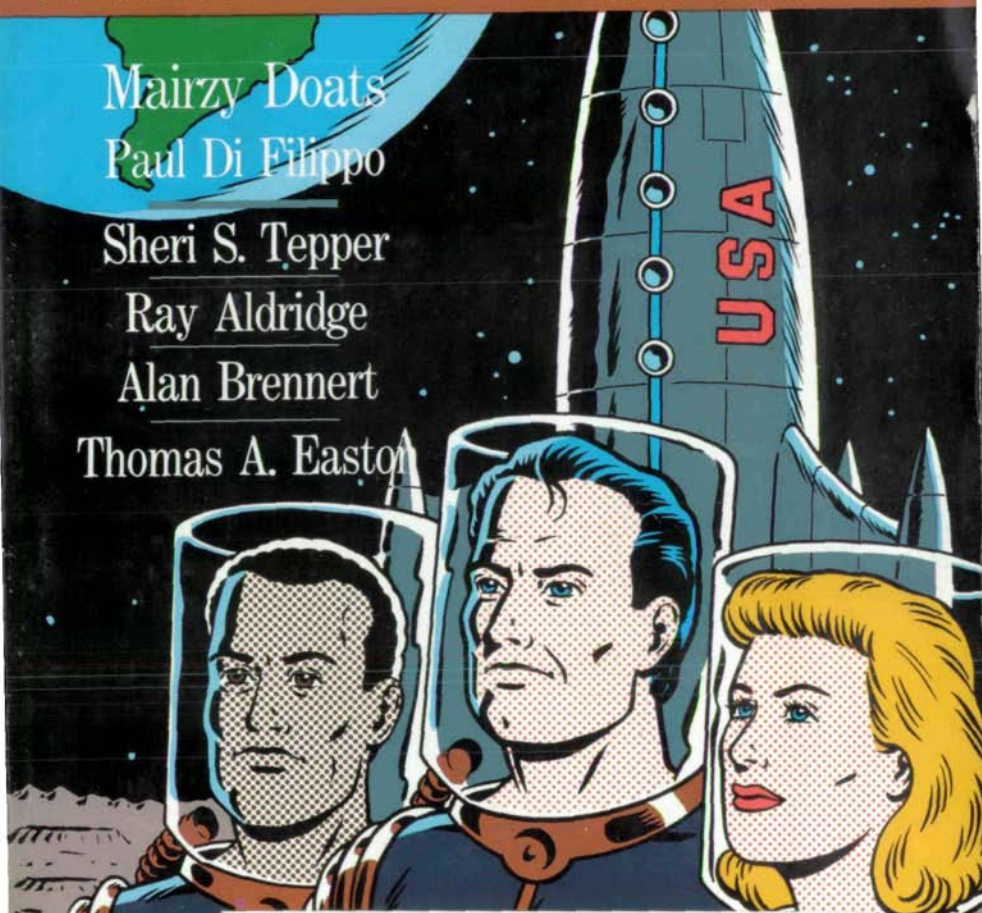


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THE MAGAZINE OF
# Fantasy & Science Fiction

**FEBRUARY • 42nd Year of Publication**

NOVELETS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **MAIRZY DOATS** | 34 | **Paul Di Filippo** |
| **THE BEASTBREAKER** | 109 | **Ray Aldridge** |


SHORT STORIES


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **MA QUI** | 5 | **Alan Brennert** |
| **THE BREAKING-UP YARD** | 56 | **John Griesemer** |
| **ATHENA KERAMITIS** | 70 | **Peg Kerr** |
| **MICRO MACHO** | 89 | **Thomas A. Easton** |
| **REAPER** | 99 | **James Alan Gardner** |
| **RACCOON MUSIC** | 140 | **Sheri S. Tepper** |


DEPARTMENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **BOOKS** | 24 | **Algis Budrys** |
| **BOOKS TO LOOK FOR** | 28 | **Orson Scott Card** |
| **SCIENCE: Down the Electron Stream** | 129 | **Isaac Asimov** |


CARTOONS: MARK HEATH (23), S. HARRIS (33), JOSEPH FARRIS (69), HENRY MARTIN (162)
COVER BY STEVE VANCE FOR "MAIRZY DOATS"

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*There is no great shortage of fantasy and SF stories about Vietnam, but this powerful tale — about some remarkable casualties who wander that country's tunnels and jungle — is something special. Alan Brennert's latest books are a novel, TIME AND CHANCE, and a short story collection, HER PILGRIM SOUL (Tor).*

# Ma Qui

**By Alan Brennert**

AT NIGHT THE choppers buzz the bamboo roof of the jungle, dumping from three thousand feet to little more than a hundred, circling, circling again, no L.Z. to land in, no casualties to pick up. Above the roar of the rotor wash come the shrieks of the damned: wails, moans, plaintive cries in Vietnamese. It's real William Castle stuff, weird sounds and screaming meemies, but even knowing it's coming from a tape recorder, even hearing the static hiss of the loudspeakers mounted on the Hueys, it still spooks the shit out of the V.C. "The Wandering Soul," it's called — the sound of dead Cong, their bodies not given a proper burial, their spirits helplessly wandering the earth. Psychological warfare. Inner Sanctum meets Vietnam. Down in the tunnels, Charlie hears it, knows it's a con, tries to sleep, but can't; the damned stuff goes on half the night. The wails grow louder the lower the choppers fly, then trail off, to suitably eerie effect, as they climb away. Until the next chopper comes with its cargo of souls-in-a-box.

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What horseshit.

It's not like that at all.

I watch the last of the choppers bank and veer south, and for a while the jungle is quiet again. Around me the ground is a scorched blister, a crater forged by mortar fire, a dusty halo of burned ground surrounding it, grasses and trees incinerated in the firelight. The crater is my bed, my bunk, my home. I sleep there — if you can call it sleep — and when I've grown tired of wandering the trails, looking for my way back to Da Nang, or Cam Ne, or Than Quit, I always wind up back here. Because this seared piece of earth is the only goddamned thing for miles that isn't 'Nam. It's not jungle; it's not muddy water; it's not punji sticks smeared with shit. It's ugly, and it's barren, and it looks like the surface of the fucking moon, but it was made by my people, the only signature they can write on this steaming, rotten country, and I sleep in it, and I feel at home.

I was killed not far from here, in a clearing on the banks of the Song Cai River. My unit was pinned down; our backup never arrived; we were racing for the L.Z. where the dust-off choppers were to pick us up. Some of us got careless. Martinez never saw the trip wire in the grass, and caught a Bouncing Betty in the groin; he died before we could get him to the L.Z. Dunbar hit a punji bear trap, the two spiked boards snapping up like the jaws of a wooden crocodile, chewing through his left leg. I thought Prosser and DePaul had pried him loose, but when I looked back, I saw their bodies not far from the trap, cut down by sniper fire as they'd tried to rescue him. The bastards had let Dunbar live, and he was still caught in the trap, screaming for help, the blood pouring out between the two punji boards. I started back, firing my M-16 indiscriminately into the tree line, hoping to give the snipers pause enough so that I could free Dunbar —

They took me out a few yards from Dunbar, half a dozen rounds that blew apart most of my chest. I fell, screaming, but I also watched myself fall; I saw the sharp blades of elephant grass slice into my face like razors as I struck the ground; I watched the blood splatter upward on impact, a red cloud that seemed briefly to cloak my body, then dissipate, splattering across the grass, giving the appearance, for a moment, of a false spring — a red dawn.

Dunbar died a few minutes later. To the west the distant thunder of choppers rolled across the treetops. I stood there, staring at the body at my feet, thinking somehow that it must be someone else's body, someone

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else's blood, and I turned and ran for the choppers, not noticing that my feet weren't quite touching the ground as I ran, not seeing myself pass through the trip wires like a stray wind.

Up ahead, dust-off medics dragged wounded aboard a pair of Hueys. Most of my unit made it. I watched Silverman get yanked aboard; I saw Esteban claw at a medic with a bloody stump he still believed was his hand. I ran to join them, but the big Chinooks started to climb, fast, once everyone was on. "Wait for me!" I yelled, but they couldn't seem to hear me over the whipping of the blades; "Son of a bitch, wait for *me!*"

They didn't slow. They didn't stop. They kept on rising, ignoring me, abandoning me. Goddamn them, what were they *doing*? Motherfucking bastards, come *back*, come—

It wasn't until I saw the thick, moist wind of the rotor wash fanning the grass — saw it bending the trees as the steel dragonflies ascended —that I realized I felt no wind on my face; that I had no trouble standing in the small hurricane at the center of the clearing. I turned around. Past the tree line, in the thick of the jungle, mortars were being lobbed from afar. Some hit their intended targets in the bush; others strayed, and blasted our position, unintentionally. I could hear the screams of V.C. before and after each hit; I saw Cong rushing out of the trees, some aflame, some limbless, only to be knocked off their feet by another incoming round. By now I knew the truth. I wandered, in a daze, back toward the tree line. I walked through sheets of flame without feeling so much as a sunburn. I saw the ground rock below me, but my steps never wavered, like the old joke about the drunken man during an earthquake.

At length the mortars stopped. The clearing was seared, desolate; bodies — Vietnamese, American — lay strewn and charred in all directions. I walked among them, rising smoke passing through me like dust through a cloud . . . and now I saw other wraiths, other figures standing above the remains of their own bodies; they looked thin, gaseous, the winds from the chopper passing overhead threatening their very solidity.

Prosser looked down at his shattered corpse and said, "Shit."

Dunbar agreed. "This sucks."

"Man, I *knew* this was gonna happen," Martinez insisted. "I just got laid in Da Nang. Is this fuckin' karma, or what?"

I made a mental note never to discuss metaphysics with Martinez. Not a useful overview.

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"So what happens now?" I asked.

"Heaven, I guess," Dunbar shrugged.

"Or Hell." Martinez. Ever the optimist.

"Yeah, but when?"

"Gotta be anytime now," Prossser said, as though waiting for the 11:00 IRT. He looked down at our bodies and grimaced. "I mean, we're dead, right?"

I looked at Dunbar's mangled leg. At Martinez's truncated torso. At....

"Hey. Collins. Where the hell are *you*?"

I should have been just a few feet away from Dunbar's body, but I wasn't. At first I thought the half a dozen rounds that had dropped me had propelled my body away, but as we fanned out, we saw no trace of it, not anywhere within a dozen yards. And when I came back to where Dunbar's body lay, I recognized the matted elephant grass where I had fallen — recognized, too, the tears of blood, now dried, coloring the tips of the grass. I squatted down, noticing for the first time that the grass was matted, in a zigzag pattern, for several feet beyond where my body fell.

"Son of a bitch," I said. "They took me."

"What?" said Martinez. "The V.C.?"

"They dragged me a few feet, then" — I pointed to where the matted grass ended — "two of them must've picked me up and taken me away."

"I didn't see anyone," Dunbar said.

"Maybe you were preoccupied," I suggested.

Prosser scanned the area, his brow furrowing. "DePaul's gone, too. He went down right next to me — we were near the river; I remember hearing the sound of the water — but he's gone."

"Maybe he was just wounded," I said. At least I hoped so. DePaul had pulled me back, months before, from stepping on what had seemed like a plot of dry grass on a trail, but what revealed itself — once we'd tossed a large boulder on top of it — as a swinging man trap: kind of a seesaw with teeth. If not for DePaul, I would've been the one swinging from it, impaled on a dozen or more rusty spikes studding its surface. DePaul had bought me a few extra months of life; maybe, when I'd run forward, firing into the tree line, I'd done the same for him, distracting the snipers long enough for him to get away.

"Hey, listen," said Dunbar. "Choppers."

The mop-up crew swooped in, quick and dirty, to recover what bodies it could. The area was secured, at least for the moment, and two grunts

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pried loose Dunbar's mangled leg from the punji bear trap and hefted him into a body bag. The zipper caught on his lip, and the grunt had to unsnare it. Dunbar was furious.

"Watch what you're doing, assholes!" he roared at them. He turned to me. "Do you believe these guys?"

Two other grunts gingerly disconnected an unexploded cartridge trap not far from Martinez's body, then scooped up what remained of the poor bastard — torso in one body bag, legs in another — and zipped the bags shut. Martinez watched as they loaded them onto the chopper, then turned to me.

"Collins. You think I should —"

I turned, but by the time I was facing him, he was no longer there.

"Martinez?"

Dunbar's body was hefted onto the Huey, it hit the floor like a sack of dry cement, and I could almost feel the air rushing in to fill the sudden vacuum beside me.

I whirled around. Dunbar, too, was gone.

"Dunbar!"

The Huey lifted off, the branches of surrounding trees shuddering around it, like angry lovers waving away a violent suitor, and I was alone.

BELIEVE IT or not, I enlisted. It seemed like a good idea at the time: lower-middle-class families from Detroit could barely afford to send one kid to college, let alone two, and with my older sister at Ann Arbor, I figured a student deferment wasn't coming my way anytime soon. So I let myself swallow the line they feed you at the recruiter's office, about how our *real* job over here was building bridges and thatching huts and helping the Vietnamese people; they made it sound kind of like the Peace Corps, only more humid.

My dad was a construction foreman; I'd been around buildings going up all my life — liked the sound of it, the feel of it, the smell of lumber and fresh concrete and the way the frame looked before you laid on the plasterboard. . . . I'd stand there staring at the girders and crossbeams, the wood-and-steel armatures that looked to my eight-year-old mind like dinosaur skeletons, and I thought: The people who'll live here will never see, never now what their house *really* looks like, underneath; but *I* know.

So the idea of building houses for homeless people and bridges for

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oxen to cross sounded O.K. Except, after eight months in 'Nam, most of the bridges I'd seen had been blown away by American air strikes, and the closest I'd come to thatching huts was helping repair the roof of a bar in Da Nang I happened to be trapped in during a monsoon.

All things considered, enlisting did not seem like the kind of blue-chip investment in the future it once had, just now.

For the first few days, I stuck close to the crater, wandering only as far as I could travel and return in a day, searching for a way back — but the way back, I knew, was farther than could ever be measured in miles, and the road was far from clearly marked. I tried not to dwell on that. If I did, I would have never mustered the nerve to move from my little corner of Hell. I wasn't sure where the nearest U.S. base was in relation to here, but I remembered a small village we'd passed the previous day, and I seemed to recall a Red Cross jeep parked near a hut, a French doctor from Catholic Relief Services administering to the villagers. Maybe he would show up again, and I could hitch a ride back to — the question kept presenting itself — *where*? What the hell did I do, ask directions to the Hereafter? With my luck, the Army was probably running *it*, too.

(Now that was a frightening thought; frighteningly plausible. This whole thing was just fucked-up enough to be an Army operation. Had I forgotten to fill out a form somewhere down the line?)

I headed back down the trail we'd followed to our deaths, but this time, along with the usual sounds of the jungle — the rustling in the bush that you hoped was *only* a bamboo viper, or a tiger — I heard the jungle's other voice. I heard the sounds the choppers, with their souls-in-a-box, only played at.

I heard weeping.

Not moaning; not wailing; none of that Roger Corman, Vincent Price shit. Just the sound of grown men weeping, uncontrollably and unconsolably — coming, it seemed, from everywhere at once. And slowly, I began to see them: V.C., blood splattered over their black silk pajamas, crouched in the bush in that funny way the V.N. sit — squatting, not sitting, on the ground — and crying. I stopped, dumbfounded. I'd never seen a V.N. cry before. I'd seen them scared — hell, I'd seen them fucking terrified — but I never saw them cry. All that crap you heard about how the V.N. are different from us, how they don't *feel* the way we do — I knew that was bullshit. They felt; they just didn't show it the way we did. But goddamned

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if these guys weren't giving our guys a run for their money, emotionally speaking. Maybe, if you're a V.C. and you're dead, it's O.K. to cry. Maybe it's expected. I moved on.

And somewhere along the trail, as I followed the Song Cai in its winding path south, I began to consider that I might not, in fact, be among the dead; that I might just be alive, after all.

Maybe, I thought, the rounds that had dropped me had just wounded me; maybe the V.C. took my body so they could get information out of me later. The more I thought about it, the more reasonable — compelling, even — it sounded. They take me, nurse me back to health so they can torture me later. (That sounded as logical as anything else in this screwy country.) And somewhere along the way, I split off from my body. Got left behind, like a shadow shaken loose from its owner. I listened to the weeping all around me — Christ, I almost wished they *were* wailing and moaning; I could've borne that a lot easier — and I decided that I wasn't, couldn't be, dead.

Up ahead the trail widened briefly into a clearing, in the middle of which stood what looked like a giant birdhouse: a bamboo hut, little more than a box, really, perched on the stump of a large tree trunk. There were spirit houses like this scattered all over 'Nam, small homes erected for the happiness of departed relatives, or embittered spirits who might otherwise prey on hapless villages. The Army briefed us on the local customs and superstitions before we even arrived over here — things like, you never pat a V.N. on the head 'cause the head, to the Vietnamese, is the seat of the soul: and *whatever* you do, don't sit with your legs crossed so that your foot is pointing toward the other person's head, because that's the grossest kind of insult. Shit like that. Some dinks would even name their male babies after women's sexual organs to try and fool evil spirits into thinking the kid was a girl, because boys were more valuable and needed to be protected. Jesus.

So I knew about spirit houses, and when we passed this one the other day, I remember thinking, Hey, that's kind of neat, even better than the treehouse I built in my grandparents' yard when I was twelve, and I went on walking.

Today I stopped. Stared at it.

Today there were people inside the birdhouse.

One was an elderly papa-san, the other a young woman, maybe twenty-

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eight, twenty-nine. They were burning joss sticks, the sweet fragrance carried back on the thick wind, and around them I saw candles, tiny handmade furniture, and a few books. I started walking again, more slowly now, and as I got within a couple yards of the birdhouse, the papa-san looked up at me, blinked once in mild surprise, then smiled and held his hand over his chest in what I recognized as a *gassho*, a traditional form of greeting and respect. His other arm, I now noticed, was askew beneath its silk sleeve, as though it had been broken, or worse.

"Welcome, traveler," he said. He was speaking in Vietnamese, but I understood, somehow, despite it.

"Uh . . . hello," I said, not sure if this worked both ways, but apparently it did; he smiled again, gesturing to his woman companion.

"I am Phan Van Duc. My daugher, Chau."

The woman turned and glared at me. She was pretty, in the abstract, but it was hard to get past the sneer on her face. So fixed, so unwavering, it looked like it'd been tattooed on. And since I wasn't sure if her anger was directed at me or not, I decided to ignore it, turned to the old man.

"My name is William Anthony Collins," I said. I wasn't sure if having three names was requisite over here, but I figured it couldn't hurt.

"May we offer you shelter?" Phan asked cordially. His daughter glowered.

There was barely enough room in the birdhouse for two, and I had no desire to be at close quarters with Chau. I declined, but thanked him for the offer.

"Have you been dead long?" the papa-san asked suddenly. I flinched.

"I'm not dead," I said stubbornly.

The old man looked at me as though I were crazy. His daughter laughed a brassy, mocking laugh.

I explained what had happened to me, what I *thought* had happened to me, and how I was heading for the village downriver to see if the Vietcong had taken my body there. Phan looked at me with sad, wise eyes as I spoke, then, when I'd finished, nodded once — more out of politeness, I suspected, than out of any credence he put in my theory.

"What you say may be true," he mused, "though I have never heard of such a thing. I would imagine, however, that rather than take a prisoner to a village, where he might easily be discovered, they would take him to one of their tunnel bases."

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The V.C. had hundreds of tunnels running beneath most of I Corps: a spiderweb of barracks and underground command posts and subterranean hospitals so vast, so labyrinthine, that we were only just beginning to understand the full scope of them. If I had been taken prisoner in one of them, the odds of finding myself were about equal to winning the Triple Crown, the World Series, and the Super Bowl, all in one year.

"In that case," I said, not really wanting to think about it, "I'll just wait for my — body — to die, and when it does, I'm out of here."

Papa-san looked at me with a half-pitying, half-perplexed look, as though I had just told him the sky was green and the moon was made of rice. Hell, come to think of it, maybe the dinks *did* think the moon was made of rice.

"What about you?" I said, anxious to shift the topic of conversation. "Why are you — here?"

Phan showed no trace of pain, or grief, as he replied.

"I was mauled by a tiger and left to bleed to death," he said simply, as though that should explain everything. Then, off my blank look, he explained patiently, "Having died a violent death, I was denied entry to the next world."

I blinked. I didn't see the connection.

"Getting mauled by a tiger, that's not your fault," I said baffled.

He looked as baffled by my words as I was by his. "What difference does fault make? What is, is." He shrugged.

I opted not to pursue the subject. Phan and Martinez would've gotten along just fine. "And your daughter?"

He looked askance at her; she threw me a nasty look, then she scrambled forward into the birdhouse, hands gripping the lip of the floor, spitting the words at me: the hard edges of the Vietnamese consonants as sharp as the bitterness in her words.

"I died childless," she snapped at me. "Is that what you wanted to hear? Are you happy? I died childless, worthless, and I am condemned because of it."

"That's crazy," I said, despite myself.

She laughed a brittle laugh. "You are the crazy one, she said, "a *ma qui*, thinking he is alive. I pity you."

"No," the papa-san said gently, "you pity no one but yourself."

She glared at him, her nostrils flaring, then laughed again shortly.

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"You are right," she said. "I pity no one. I don't know why I let you keep me here. I can do anything I want. I can bring disease back to the village, kill the children of my former friends. Yes. I think I would like that." She grinned maliciously, as though taking relish in the wickedness of her thought.

"You will not," Phan warned. "I am your father, and I forbid it."

She muttered a curse under her breath and retreated to the rear of the birdhouse. The papa-san turned and looked at me sadly.

"Do not judge my daughter by what she is now," he said softly. "Death makes of us what it wishes."

Jesus Christ, these people actually believed that. And so, I guess, that's just what they got. Well, not me. No fucking way, man. Not me.

I backed away. "I have to go."

"Wait," Phan said. I halted; I'm not sure why. He leaned forward, as though to share something important with me. "If you go into the village . . . you must be careful. Do not walk in the front door of a house, because the living keep mirrors by the doorway, to reflect the image of those who enter. If a spirit sees himself in the mirror, he will be frightened off. Also, if red paper lines the entrance, stay away, for you will anger the God of the Doorway. Do you understand?"

I nodded numbly, thanked him for his advice, and got the hell out of there, fast.

I HURRIED DOWN the trail, past the weeping guerrillas in black silk, feeling a sudden black longing for something as violent and mundane as a mortar strike; yearning for the sound of gunships, the bright spark of tracer fire, the crackling of small-arms fire, or the din of big Chinook choppers circling in for the kill. God *damn*. This was the dinks' Hell, not mine. I wasn't going to be a part of it; I would *not* buy into their stupid, superstitious horseshit. The weeping around me grew louder. I started running now, phantom limbs passing harmlessly through trip wires and across punji traps, even the elephant grass not so much as tickling my calves as I ran along banks of the Song Cai—

The weeping changed. Became different: deeper. I knew instantly that it was not the cries of a Vietnamese; knew, suddenly and sickeningly, that it was an American's cries I was hearing.

I stopped, looked around. I saw no one lying wounded in the bush, but heard now, too, a voice:

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"— Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, *help me* —"

Oh Christ, I thought.

DePaul.

I looked up. He was floating about five feet above the muddy waters of the river, like a tethered balloon, his big, six-foot frame looking almost gaseous, his black skin seeming somehow pale. His hands covered his face as he wept, prayed, swore, and wept again, but I soon realized that it was the water flowing under him that gave the illusion of movement; he swayed back and forth slightly, but was utterly motionless, completely stationary.

It took me a moment to recover my wits. I shouted his name over the roar of the rapids.

He looked up, startled.

When he saw me — saw me looking at *him* — his face lit up with a kind of absolution. "Oh Jesus," he said, so softly I almost couldn't hear it. "*Collins!* Are you real?"

"I sure as shit hope so."

"Are you alive?"

I dodged the question. "What the hell happened to you, man? Prosser said you went down right next to him, but your body —"

"Charlie hit me in the back." I could see the hole torn in his skin at the nape of his neck, and the matching one in front, just below his collarbone, where the bullet had exited. "I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Got up somehow, ran — but in the wrong direction. Dumped into the river. Christ, Bill, it was awful. I was choking *and* drowning, and the next thing I knew" — his hand had gone reflexively to his throat, covering the ragged hole there — "my body floated downriver, then got snagged on some rock. Over there."

I followed his gaze. His body was pinned between two rocks, the waters flowing around it, flanking it in white foam. I turned back to DePaul, floating in place above the river, and I took a step forward.

"Christ, De," I said softly. "How — I mean, what —"

"I *can't get down*, man," he said, and for the first time, I heard the pain in his voice. "I been here two, three days, and it *hurts*. Oh Christ, it hurts! It's not like floating; Jesus, it's like treading water; every muscle in my body aches — I'm so *tired*, man, I'm so —" He broke off in sobs, something I'd never seen him do. He looked away, let the tears come, then looked

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back at me, his eyes wide. "Help me, Collins," he said softly. "*Help me.*"

"Just tell me how," I said, feeling helpless, horrified. "Why — why are you *like* this, man? You have any idea?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know," he said, taking a ragged gulp of air. "It's — it's 'cause I died in water, see? You die in water, your spirit's tied to the water till you can find another one to —"

"*What!* Jesus Christ, De, where'd you *get* that shit from?"

"Another spook. V.C., half his head blown away, wanderin' up and down the river. He told me."

"You bought *into* that crap?" I yelled at him. "These dinks believe this shit, man; *you* don't have to — you're an *American*, for Chrissake!"

"Collins —"

"You believe it, it happens. You stop believing, it stops happening. Just —"

His eyes were sunken, desperate. "Please, man. Help me?"

No matter what I thought of this shit, there was only one thing that mattered: he'd saved my life once; and even if there was no more life in him to save, I could, at least, try to ease his torment. I *had* to try.

"All right," I said. "What can I do?"

He hesitated.

"Bring me a kid," he said quietly.

"A kid? Why?"

He hesitated again; then, working up his nerve, he said, "To release me. A life for a life."

My eyes went wide. "*What?*"

"It's the only way," he said quickly. "You die in water, the only way to be set free is to — drown — a kid, as an offering." His eyes clouded over; his gaze became hooded and ashamed even as he said it. For a long minute, the only sound was the rushing of water past the dam of DePaul's corpse, and the distant sounds of weeping carried on the wind.

Finally I said, "I can't do that, man."

"Bill —"

"Even if I believed it'd work — *especially* if I believed it'd work — I couldn't —"

"Not a healthy kid," DePaul interrupted, desperation and pleading creeping into his tone, "a sick one. One that's gonna die anyway. Shit, half the gook kids over here die before they're —"

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"Are you crazy, man?" I snapped. "Gook or not, I can't —"

I stopped. Listened to what I was saying.

DePaul's face was ashen, in torment. "Collins . . . please. I hurt so bad —"

I was buying into this crap. Just like him. Someone'd filled his head with dink superstition, and now he was living — or dying — by it. That was it, wasn't it? You die, you get pretty much what you expect: Catholics, Heaven or Hell; atheist, maybe nothing, nonexistence, loss of consciousness; dinks — this. And we'd been over here so long, wading knee-deep in their fucking country, that we were starting to believe what they believed.

But the DePaul I knew would never kill a kid. Not even to save himself. Maybe the only way to shake him loose from this bullshit was to show him that.

I waited a long minute, thinking, devising a plan, and then, finally, I spoke up.

"A sick kid?" I asked carefully, as though I actually believed all this.

He looked up hopefully. "One that's gonna die anyway. You've seen 'em; you know what they look like; you can see it in their eyes —"

"I won't bring one that's gonna live," I cautioned.

"No, no, man, you don't have to. A sick kid. A real sick kid." God, he sounded pathetic.

I told him I didn't know how long it would take, but that I would head into the village we had passed through a few days ago, and I'd see what I could do. I told him I'd be back as soon as I could.

"Don't leave me, Collins." It was the last thing I heard before I headed back into the bush once again. He'd bought the line. Now all I had to do was show him he'd bought another — and, more important, that he could buy out of it.

The village was about two hours up the road. There was no Red Cross jeep in sight, no Catholic Relief doctor handing out aspirin and antibiotics; just the squalid little huts, the half-naked kids running through muddy puddles probably rife with typhoid, tired-looking women doing laundry in a small stream tributary to the Song Cai. There was a huge crater at the edge of town — the mortar strike that had been too late to save me and Dunbar and DePaul. Nearby roofs were scorched; at least two huts had been burned to the ground. Friendly fire. Any friendlier, and half

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the village would be greeting me personally. I walked up the main road, peeking in windows. If I was going to make it look genuine, I'd have to bring back a genuinely sickly kid; though exactly how, I still wasn't sure.

Outside one hut I heard the sound of a mother comforting a squalling baby, and decided to go in and take a look. Sure enough, just as the old papa-san had predicted, the doorway was lined with red paper to ward off evil spirits. I stepped across the threshold. Big fucking deal. Up yours, God of the Doorway. I turned—

I screamed.

In the mirror positioned just inside, I saw a man with a foot-wide hole blasted in his chest: the torn edges of the wound charred to a crisp, the cavity within raw and red as steak tartare. A pair of lungs dangled uselessly from the slimmest of folds of flesh, swaying as I jumped back reflexively; beside them a heart riddled with half a dozen jagged frag wounds throbbed in a stubborn counterfeit of life.

And behind me in the mirror, a glimpse of something else: a shadow, a *red* shadow, as red as the paper above the doorway . . . . moving not as I moved, but looming up, and quickly, behind me.

I ran.

Out of the house, down the street, away from the huts, finally collapsing on a patch of elephant grass. At first I was afraid to look down at myself, but when I did, I saw nothing — saw exactly what I'd seen up till now, the drab green camouflage fatigues stained with blood. All this time, I realized, I had seen everyone else's wounds but mine. Not till now.

I sat there, gathering my wits and my courage, trying to work up the nerve to enter another hut. I didn't think about the mirror, didn't dwell on what I'd seen. Better just to think of myself this way, the way some part of me *wanted* to see myself. When I finally got up and started round to the huts again, I steered well clear of the doors.

There was the usual assortment of sickly kids — malaria mostly, but from the look of them, a few typhoid, influenza, and parasitic dysentery cases as well. I felt gruesome as hell, trying to choose which one to take, even knowing this was only a game, something to shock DePaul back to normalcy. *Just get it over with.* I looked in one window and saw what appeared to be a two-year-old girl — in a dress made of old parachute nylon, an earring dangling too large from one tiny lobe — being washed by her mother. It was only when the mother turned the child over and I saw

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the small brown penis, that I remembered: the mother was trying to deceive the evil spirits into thinking their sickly boy child was really a girl, and thus not worth the taking.

Jesus, I thought. Said a lot about the place of women over here. But it did mean the kid was probably seriously ill, and after I'd used her — him — to get DePaul back to normal, I could take the poor kid to the nearest Evac . . . leave it on the doorstep of the civilian ward with a note telling the name of his village.

Assuming I could *write* a note.

Assuming I could even *take* the kid in the first place.

I took a deep breath and, once the mother had left the room, walked through the wall of the hut. I didn't feel the bamboo any more than I'd felt the trip wires I'd run through. I stood over the infant, now worried that my hands would pass through him as well . . . then slowly reached down to try and pick him up.

I touched him. I didn't know how, or why, but I could touch him.

I scooped the boy up in my arms and held him to my chest. He looked up at me with old, sad eyes. All the kids here had the same kind of eyes: tired, cheerless, and somehow knowing. As though all the misery around them, all the civil wars and foreign invaders — from the French to the Japanese to the Americans — as though all that were known to them, before they'd even been born. Rocked in a cradle of war, they woke, with no surprise, to a lullaby of thunder.

I walked through the wall of the hut, the child held aloft, and carried him through the window. When we were clear of the building, I hefted the boy up, held him in my arms, and headed into the bush before anyone could see.

I WANTED TO stay off the main road, for fear that someone might see me: not me, I guess, since I *couldn't* be seen, but the kid, the boy. [What, I wondered, would someone see, if they did see? A child carried aloft on the wind? Or an infant wrapped in the arms of a shadow, a smudge on the air? I didn't know. I didn't want to find out.] Every once in a while, I'd see a dead V.C. look up from where he was squatting, on the banks of the river or in the shade of a rubber tree, and look at me, sometimes with curiosity, sometimes resentment, sometimes fear. They never said anything. Just stared, and at length went back to their mourning, their weeping. I hurried past them.

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About half a mile from DePaul, I caught a glimpse of a squad of still-living V.C. about a dozen yards into the jungle, carrying what looked like an unconscious American G.I., probably an LRRP. I immediately squatted down in the bush, hiding the kid from view as best I could, dropping a fold of blanket over his face to protect him from the prickly blades of grass. I watched as one of the V.C. bent down, reaching for what looked like a patch of dry dirt, his fingers finding a catch, a handle of some sort; and then the earth lifted, and I saw it was actually a trapdoor in the ground itself — a piece of wood covered with a thin but deceptive layer of dirt. One by one the V.C. crawled headfirst into the tunnel, until only two were left — the two carrying the unconscious G.I. I debated what to do — was there anything I *could* do? — but before I could make a decision, I saw the G.I.'s head tilt at an unnatural angle as he was lowered into the ground... and I knew then that I'd been mistaken. He wasn't unconscious; he was dead. And, very quickly, lost from sight.

Psychological warfare. Drove Americans crazy when we couldn't recover our dead, and Charlie knew it. Just like we played on their fears with the Wandering Soul, they played on ours, in their own way. I got up and moved on.

Less than half an hour later, I was back at the river. DePaul still floated helpless above the rapids. He looked up at my approach, the torment in his face quickly supplanted with astonishment and — fear?

I brought the kid to the edge of the river, looked up at DePaul, made my voice hard, resolute — all that Sergeant York shit.

"He's got malaria," I said tonelessly. "You can tell when you pull down his lower eyelid; it's all pink. He's anemic, can't weigh more than twenty pounds. They could save him, at the 510 Evac. Or you can take him, to save yourself." I stared him straight in the eye. "Which is it, DePaul?"

I'd known DePaul since boot camp. Faced with the reality of it, I knew what he'd answer.

And as I waited smugly for him to say it, his gaseous wraithlike form spun round in midair, rocketed downward like a guided missile, and slammed into me with vicious velocity, sending me sprawling, knocking the kid out of my arms.

Stunned, I screamed at him, but by the time I'd scrambled to my feet, he had the kid in a vise grip and was holding the poor sonofabitch under the water. I ran, slammed into De with all my strength, but he shrugged

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me off with an elbow in my face. I toppled backward.

"I'm sorry, man," he kept saying over and over; "I'm sorry. . . ."

I lunged at him again, this time knocking him off-balance; he lost his grip on the kid, and I dove into the water after the boy. It felt weird: the water passed *through* me — I didn't feel wet, or cold, nothing at all — and the waters were so muddy I could barely see a foot in front of me. Finally, after what seemed like forever, I saw a small object in front of me, and instinctively, I reached out and grabbed. My fingers closed around the infant's arms. I made for the surface, the kid in my arms; I staggered out of the water, up the embankment —

I put the boy down on the ground. His face was blue, his body very still. I tried to administer mouth-to-mouth, but nothing happened; and I laughed suddenly, a manic, rueful laugh, at the thought of me, of all people, trying to give the breath of life.

I looked up, thinking to see DePaul towering above me . . . but he was nowhere to be seen. And when I looked up at the spot above the river where he had been tethered, helplessly, for so long —

I saw the spirit-form of the little boy, floating, hovering, crying out in pain and confusion.

I screamed. I screamed for a long time.

And knew now why I'd been able to touch the child, when I hadn't been able to touch anything else: I was the *ma qui*; I was the evil spirit come to bear the sickly child away; and I had done my job, followed my role, without even realizing I'd been doing it. I thought of Phan, of his daughter Chau, of DePaul and of myself.

*Death makes of us what it wishes.*

I wept, for the first time, as freely and as helplessly as the V.C. I'd seen and heard; wept like the Wandering Soul I knew, at last, I had to be.

I must've stayed there, on the banks of the river, for at least a day, trying to find some way to atone, some way to save the soul of the child I'd led to perdition. But I couldn't. I would've traded places with him willingly, but didn't know how. And when I went back to the spirit house where Phan and his daughter dwelled, when I told him of what I'd done, he showed no horror, expressed no rage; just puzzlement that it had taken me so long to realize my place in the world.

His daughter, on the other hand, gleefully congratulated me on my

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deed. *"Ma qui,"* she said, and this time, hearing the word, I understood it not just as ghost, but as devil, for it meant both. "Did it not feel good?"

A terrible gladness burst open someplace inside me — a black, cold poison that felt at once horrifying and invigorating. It was relief, expiation of guilt by embracing, not renouncing, the evil I'd done.

Chau, as though sensing this, laughed throatily. She leaned forward, her spiteful smile now seductive as well. *"Yêu dâu,"* she said, *"yêu quâi."*

*Beloved demon.*

"Together we could do many things," she said, twisting a lock of long black hair in her fingers. Her eyes glittered malevolently. "Many things." She laughed again. Cruel eyes, a cold-blooded smile. I felt betrayed by my own erection. I wanted her; I didn't want her. I loathed her, and in my loathing wanted her all the more, because perverse desire was at least desire; I wanted my cock, dead limb that it was, inside her, to make me feel alive.

When I realized how badly I wanted it, I ran.

She laughed all the louder.

"Beloved demon!" she called after me. "You shall be back!"

But I haven't been back. Not yet. Nor back to the crater, the place of my death, not for many months. I still search for my body, but I know that the odds of finding it, in the hundreds of miles of tunnels that honeycomb this land, are virtually nil. I search during the days, and at night I come back to my new home to sleep.

I have a birdhouse of my own, you see, just outside the village; a treehouse perched on a bamboo stump, filled with joss sticks and candles and little toy furniture. I come back here, and I fight to remind myself who I am, what I am; I struggle against becoming the *yêu quâi*, the demon Chau wishes me to be. Except, that is, when the bloodsong sings to me in my voice, and I know that I already *am* the demon — and that the only thing that stops me from acting like one is my will, my conscience, the last vestiges of the living man I once was. I don't know how long I can keep the demon at bay. I don't know how long I want to. But all I can do is keep trying, and not think of Chau, or of how wonderfully bitter her lips must taste, bitter as salt, bitter as blood.

*Damn* it.

Above me the Wandering Soul cries out from its box, wailing and moaning in a ridiculous burlesque of damnation, and I think about all

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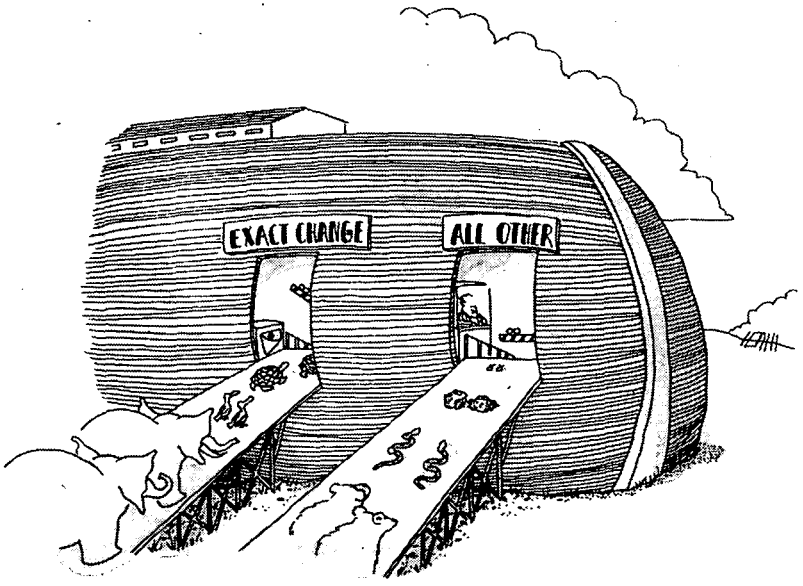
the things we were told about this place, and the things we weren't. Back in Da Nang, when anyone would talk about the Army's "pacification" program — about winning the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese —the joke used to be: Grab 'em by the balls, and their hearts and minds will follow. Except, no one told us that while we were working on their hearts and minds, they were winning over our souls. The Army trained us in jungle warfare, drilled us in the local customs, told us we'd have to fight Charlie on his own terms — but never let on that we'd have to die on his terms, too. Because for all the technology, all the ordnance, all the planning that went into this war, they forgot the most important thing.

They never told us the rules of engagement.

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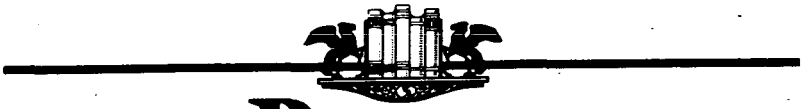

# BOOKS

## ALGIS BUDRYS

*The Cipher*, Kathe Koja, Dell, $3.95

DELL, OF Bantam Doubleday Dell, has chosen Kathe Koja's *The Cipher* to lead off its new horror line, and, irrespective of its intrinsic merits, it means Dell is leading off a brand new line with a total unknown. This implies either an unusual degree of confidence on Dells' part or a truly staggering miscalculation, or (nothing is easy) something in between.

Well, I see no reason to keep you hanging; it's a good book but it's not as good as Kathe Koja's books are going to be. And this means that Dell has, by some degree, miscalculated. If this book had been second in the line, and the first had been by somebody famous, it would have been better all around.

Kathe Koja is a lot of things, not the least of which is a byline you should take to heart; this is one of the hottest names to turn up in years, and I am not kidding when I say that her books are just going to get better and better. And though she looks like a slip of a girl — if you like your slips tall, dark and wow — she has been around. It's actually quite some years, now, since she was at Clarion East. It's some years, now, since she started selling short fiction. It was high time she wrote and sold a novel.

She has turned the trick — she is not only a good writer, she is a writer with something to say. That is, unfortunately, rarer than it ought to be. But Kathe makes up for ten or twelve simply talented people. She is dynamite. With that said, what's her first novel like?

Well, it definitely is horror. Nakota, a Japanese-American bitch of undoubted qualifications, and her slave/lover/friend/enemy Nick Wiener, find, in an abandoned room in Nick's tenement, a black hole. And the entire book has to do with how they deal with it — or, rather, how it deals with them, assuming, of course, that it even knows of them. There are a few clues that it does.

Nick would just as soon leave it

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alone and continue his existence as assistant manager of a video store, while Nakota keeps on being the bartender in a place that is, definitely, no better than it should be. But Nakota won't leave the hole alone. She exposes a jar of moths and other bugs to the hole, and the result is a transmutation, in part; the bugs die, and nothing really finished emerges in exchange, but the bugs underwent radical semi-transformation in the process, and Nakota claims to be able to almost decipher the runes she says are written on the fragments of wing that she recovers.

She becomes even more smitten with the hole, and lowers a succession of objects into it — for instance, a hand, stolen from an anatomy class, which comes to life and scurries back up the fishing line . . . fortunately, only to die again. Unfortunately, Nick suggests scornfully that Nakota should try an eyeball next time. Thus he finds himself persuaded to "borrow" a camcorder from the video store. And thus he and Nakota get a tape, which can't be duplicated, and on which only he sees the same thing all the time, and which radically changes their relationship, again.

Nakota had started sleeping with him again when she found the hole. But now, with him still not caring to explore it, she begins to bring other people into their confidence because (a) she is obsessed with the hole and (b) unfortunately, only with Nick around does the hole do its stuff, so (c) she must bring other people into it because Nick hates her. And this, although it is for the most part good, and broadens the cast of characters just when this needed doing, is not handled perfectly. For instance, Vanese, girlfriend of Randy, the tow truck driver who is a sculptor at night, seems to be the only sane person in this book. Unfortunately, she eventually pulls back from the story and refuses to partake of it any longer. With the result that Randy eventually pulls out of it, too.

There is something not quite right in this. By now there is a considerable cast involved with the hole — bearing in mind that Nick is the only one who can actually make it work — and it makes sense, I suppose, that the two of them — Randy and Vanese — being the only sane folk should, in the end, just pull out and leave everybody else to cope with it as they can. But there was a promise that Vanese would do more than that, and Randy seems not quite in focus, either. It's as if Koja had intended something different for them, but as the narrative unfolded she didn't have enough for Vanese to do, and so — since she couldn't cut her out —

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simply relegated to her to an offstage voice, after launching her as a fullblown character. Which means that Randy, too, is not quite as fullblown as he apparently set out to be.

The rest of the story is fine . . . almost without exception. Frankly, the entire ending strikes me as not being, quite, as exciting as the rest of the book; perhaps the word I really want is "comprehensible," in the special sense of horror-novel logic, which is not the same as any other sort of logic. Perhaps I should endeavor to say what I mean:

About one-fourth of the way through the book, Nick accidentally sticks his hand into the hole. He draws it out quickly enough, but now his right hand has a hole in it, too, and this begins to drip a clear fluid which, at the end of the book, is pretty omnipresent, just as the hole is now palm-size. After he gets the hole in his palm, Nick (a) loses, or rather, gives up, his job; (b) lives an increasingly bizarrre life, which includes going to live in the same room with the hole, (c) occasionally floats above the hole and rotates.

Well and good, but it doesn't seem to come to as much as it might. There is a *great* deal of action, in the sense of additional characters being introduced, many of them apparently major, but it boils down to Nick and Nakota, and, after Nick kills Nakota, to Nick, who, pretty much out of his mind, and pretty much messed up physically, decides to go into the hole, whereupon the book ends.

Now, given the kind of black hole it is, this may make sense — after all, how could we expect to get messages back from *whatever* Nick becomes? But that is normal logic. We may not be able to decipher messages Nick in some sense sends, but we would, indeed, get something back. And in some way we would know that, if only through the utterances, for instance, of Nick's life-mask. (A late-blooming character made a life-mask of Nick, and it shortly begins to speak. Other than that, don't ask.)

We know very little about the hole, but we know it is somehow, selective of Nick. It came to life in his tenement, it will not do for others what it will do for him, and, in fact, it seems, in some sort of terrifying way, to be in love with him. This raises the possibility that it *is* Nakota, in some sense; time-looped so that there is still a mundane Nakota to apparently interact with it for some time, but increasingly expressing her terrifying love for Nick through the hole rather than through her mundane body. But that is not clear; what is apparently clear is that Nick leaves this story just as it reaches a major point of

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terror. And I think that is a mistake.

Not a major mistake, mind you, any more than the disappearance of Vanese and Randy is a major mistake. But the Koja of, say, a year from now, would handle it differently or would show why it could not be handled differently . . . that is, would have written this in some form such that the question would not have occurred to me.

The thought I want to leave you with here is complex. First of all, possible flaws or not, this is a genuinely terrifying story if you are the least disposed to be terrified by stories. Perhaps more important, it presents a milieu that is far from usual; it is a story involving people you would not care to have speak to you, and they have NO redeeming features that would let you say "Well, except for. . . ." Forget it; any one of these people, *including* Vanese and Randy, would scare the bejeezus out of you if they so much as looked at you on the street.

And that is Koja's real accomplishment here. Never mind the black hole, creepy though it is. Far more important, Koja knows and understands this kind of person, and speaks of them. You may not care to know them; tough tiddy. Koja mades you know them, and hangs enough of a story on them to keep you reading, and if at times she gets downright crude about it, well, she will probably smooth that out in later books. If it strikes her as important, which is another big question.

I don't know — maybe Dell knew what it was doing, after all.

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## BOOKS RECEIVED

*At the Mountains of Madness*, H. P. Lovecraft, Donald M. Grant, Publisher, West Kingston, R.I. 02892, Cloth, $120.00

An 875-copy collector's edition, oversized (13½ x 9½) illustrated by Brazilian artist Fernando Duval and signed by the artist.

* * *

*An Annotated Bibliography of Recursive Science Fiction*, compiled by Anthony Lewis, New England Science Fiction Association, Box G, MIT Branch P.O., Cambridge, MA 02139, Paper, $7.00

Recursive in this case means "self referential," and so this is a bibliography of science fiction stories (and novels) about science fiction. Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg.

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# Books to Look For

## BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

*Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, Sissela Bok (Vintage, paper, 326 pp, $7.95)

*Nixon: The Triumph of A Politician, 1962-1972*, Stephen E. Ambrose (Simon & Schuster, Cloth, 736pp, $24.95)

*The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, Robert A. Caro (Knopf, cloth, 506pp, $24.95)

*In the Shadow of the Dome: Chronicles of a Capitol Hill Aide*, Mark Bisnow (Morrow, 319pp, $20.95)

*Writers in Hollywood, 1915-1951*, Ian Hamilton (Harper & Row, cloth, 326pp, $25.00)

*The Ages Of Gaia*, James Lovelock (Norton/Bantam New Age, paper, 252pp, $10.95)

*Ice Time: Climate, Science, and Life on Earth*, Thomas Levenson (Harper & Row/Perennial Library, paper, 242pp, $9.95)

SCIENCE FICTION and fantasy are only a small part of my reading, as I assume they are only a small part of *yours*. This column, of course, is devoted to that small part — but now and then, with our Esteemed Editor's kind tolerance, I do like to point out some excellent non-genre books that I believe may hold interest for you.

Sissela's Bok's *Lying* is that rare thing in these days: a completely accessible treatment of a serious philosophical issue. The issue of lying is much in the air these days — for instance, the absurd statement that George Bush was *lying* when he pledged "no new taxes," as if people had forgotten the crucial distinction between a broken promise and a lie. Lying is often treated in contemporary American public discourse as the worst crime a politician can commit ("I don't mind that Gary Hart slept around, just that he *lied* about it"); at least the press treats it that way perhaps because telling untruths is the particular sin of which the press most often finds itself both victim and perpetrator — it weighs heavy on their minds. And yet I daresay not a one of us goes through a single day without telling at least one whopper, or at least stretching the truth a tad. Bok's book, even though it reaches no definite answers (how could it?), nevertheless clarifies the question marvelously well. It's also a pleasure to read; you do not have

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to have studied philosophy to understand it.

The matter of lying brings us, of course, to three books about American politics. Caro's *Means of Ascent* and Ambrose's *The Triumph of a Politician* deal with Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, two of the three most personally corrupt presidents in this century (and Warren Harding is not the other). It happens that Johnson has been blessed — or cursed —with a much more talented biographer than Nixon. Both writers are trying to be fair, of course, but Caro achieves his unflinching fairness by neglecting none of the record and making no excuses, while Ambrose seems at times to flail about, trying to prove his liberal credentials by uttering prig little moral judgments on Nixon, "balancing" them with occasional excuses or explanations or mitigations. The result is that, while Caro leaves us with a picture of Lyndon Johnson as a moral monster, he also reveals him a man of heroic proportion in his appetite for power. Johnson's achievements as well as his flaws are comprehended; Ambrose, on the other hand, reveals Nixon to be a rather moral dwarf, and Nixon remains an enigma, condemned but not well explained.

Regardless of the two biographies' relative merits, however, both books (and the previous volumes in each series, Caro's *The Path to Power* and Ambrose's *Nixon: The Education of a Politician*) have immeasurable value in their exploration of American politics in the middle of the twentieth century. This is particularly interesting, I think, to science fiction readers and writers, for if there's one area where science fiction writers have generally proven themselves to be almost childishly ignorant, it is politics and government. Far too often the novels and stories in our field show politicians holding meetings that would never be held, saying words that would never be spoken, and making decisions for reasons that would be laughed out of any serious discussion in Washington. Far too often, as sf and contemporary fantasy writers try to show us a "dangerous politician" they show no comprehension of how *real* dangerous politicians actually get, keep, and use power. And that very ignorance is, in itself, dangerous; I wish sf writers would take half as much care with their representation of politics as with their science. Despite their best efforts, no science fiction writer has yet come up with a character who approaches the abysmal toadiness of the ultimate backstabbing sycophant who emerges under the name of Kissinger in Ambrose's

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book. It may be a shocking idea, but it *is* possible to refer back to reality in order to bring greater truth into our fiction.

With that goal in mind, let us ban forever the stupid depictions of congressmen that disgrace almost every story that uses such a character by requiring all sf writers to read Bisnow's *In the Shadow of the Dome* before we'll read any work of theirs in which they attempt to show the workings of the American government. Those with no understanding keep depicting congressmen in meetings that are never held, or showing floor debates or committee hearings as a significant part of the decision-making process. Those with a little understanding go to the opposite extreme, painting congressmen as universally stupid, venal, ignorant puppets doing whatever the polls tell them must be done. The truth is somewhere else entirely — and perhaps even more disturbing. Each congressman is at the head of a rather large fact-finding, decision-making organization, whose membership is in constant flux and whose processes can sometimes be coopted by very junior aides. Bisnow's book is forthright and honest — so honest that he often reveals his own moral compromises with the system that he has come to love rather too well. Admittedly, reading these books will spoil a great deal of science fiction for you; it will also make you realize how easily government in the American democracy has slipped from the control of the people and into the hands of those who, for good or ill, covet power.

Compared to what politicians can do, writers can seem like pretty small potatoes. And nowhere do writers feel smaller than in Hollywood, where everybody *but* the author seems able to take credit for a successful film. (Quick — name the directors of *E.T.*, *Poltergeist*, *Alien*, *Aliens*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Now name the screenwriters.) Writers have discovered that the only way they can get control — and credit — is to become directors as well as screenwriters. And yet this one simple fact remains: Directors, actors, editors, and producers have often made excellent screenplays into very bad movies, but no one, ever, has made a bad screenplay into a good movie.

Ian Hamilton's *Writers in Hollywood* chronicles the woeful path of movie writers, from their obscure beginnings as scenarists, through the pretentious period of the thirties, to the writers' post-war humiliation at the hands of Congress and the industry. Hamilton's book is anecdotal and fun. He also reveals himself to have the same view of the writers' art that has poisoned

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American letters in recent years. He despises the writers who actually wrote movies that the common people loved, and treats with slavish respect the antics of such film incompetents as William Faulkner. But Hamilton's personal attitudes are only additional symptoms of the disease called Hollywood, so well-chronicled in this book. And those who are familiar with the progress of the genre of science fiction, from a diseased minor genre to a feared and loathed (by literateurs) major one, will find many striking parallels, from the almost pathological hunger for respect to the desperate self-destruction of some of its practitioners, along with the constant reminder that no matter how impossible it all seems, the new art can be and often is both excellent and important. Think of this book as accidental anthropology, and you'll enjoy it twice as much.

JAMES LOVELOCK is well known to many of you; I am probably one of the last in the field to come to his work, though I am no less excited for having come so late to the intellectual feast he offers. His concept of all Earthborne systems, organic and inorganic, forming one organism called Gaia is one of those breakthroughs that is not so much a discovery as a new angle of view. As Shirley Strum said in *Almost Human*, "Once there is a new model, scientists can look in the same places they have looked for decades and make new discoveries." Gaia is such a new model, and *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* is the best book to read as an introduction.

Of course, new models are always slow to win acceptance; again quoting Strum, "It is often difficult for a scientist to switch paradigms — in the course of a lifetime to change his or her ideas. Only when the adherents of the old model actually die does the new come fully into its own." And Lovelock's Gaia is further handicapped by the way it has been adopted by many in the New-Age lunatic fringe, who seize upon the idea of Gaia and then get all mystical about it, treating it as a religion rather than a valid scientific model.

But valid it clearly is — obvious, indeed, once one has thought of it — and it is already having some influence. Perhaps the most important thing the Gaia hypothesis can accomplish is to awaken specialists to the crying need for interdisciplinary fertilization — much the same thing that the Chaos idea is doing. We have spent the last century carefully subdividing science into ever-smaller subdivisions, forgetting that details only acquire

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meaning in context. If Lovelock accomplishes nothing else, it will be a noble achievement indeed if he only gets a significant number of scientists to raise their heads out of their own narrow discipline and discover the vast surrounding context. Evolution, for instance, ceases to be a meaningless series of accidents and becomes, instead, the internal regulatory system that allows Gaia to adapt to changes in its environment — incresing heat from the sun, for instance, or diminishing heat from the Earth's core, or gradual losses or increases in various ambient substance.

Best of all, Lovelock has written his book to be accessible to all intelligent readers, deliberately eschewing the jargon of any particular discipline. To some narrow-minded scientists and philosophers, of course, this means that Lovelock's work isn't rigorous, and therefore isn't serious. But to those who judge ideas by their merits and uses, Lovelock's approach is exactly right. Jargon narrows the audience for any writing; Lovelock's ideas, if they have any value, must be offered to all the scientific community at once. Lovelock has easily attracted *disciples*, of course — but he doesn't want them. They would have as deadly and stultifying an effect as Freud's and Skinner's disciples have had in field of pyschology. What he wants are gaialogists — scientists who take an interdisciplinary, systemic approach to their studies of life and Earth. A microbiologist, a geologist, a climatologist, a botanist, an ecologist — all could, and perhaps *must*, become gaialogists as well in order to achieve truly signficant work in their own disciplines.

For an application of the gaialogical viewpoint to another science that had long been handicapped by its isolation, you can profitably read Thomas Levenson's *Ice Time*. Not only is it an excellent treatment of the current state of climatology, the book includes examples of how narrowness of vision can hamper science at every turn, with wonderful discoveries languishing until someone arrives who can put all the evidence together and draw out a coherent picture. Where Lovelock is an original thinker, a philosopher, Levenson is a reporter and commentator; yet there's a need for both, if we who are *not* experts in particular fields are to comprehend them. And what Levenson chronicles is the specific application of Lovelock's vision — along with a sense of how important the emergent understanding will be to our future. Storytelling — the invention and sharing of hypotheses and theories — is every bit as important to science as the gathering of data, and Lovelock

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and Levenson are both excellent storytellers.

These seven books should be joined by an eighth, Shirley C. Strum's *Amost Human*, from which I have quoted. But Strum's book is so excellent, both as a science book and as a science-fiction-like story, that I want to review it at greater length. So — again with our Esteemed Editors's kind forebearance — I'll review it later along with some terrific science fiction and fantasy that is already piled shockingly high beside my bed. . . .

*"I'm here for your refrigerator."*

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*This story about a science-fiction writer and an expedition to the Moon is for all you guys who have been asking for more good, old-fashioned upbeat SF. It's so upbeat, it may even leave you humming, and this is what you'll hum . . .*

# Mairzy Doats

**By Paul Di Filippo**

TAPED TO THE wall above the big, atomic-powered Underwood typewriter was a page torn from an issue of *Life* magazine. Held in place by curling masking tape at the corners, the advertisement was for Rheingold beer. Miss Rheingold of 1948 — a sexy redhead named Anita Mann — lay on a striped towel on some beach. Sand, surf, umbrellas, gaily colored inflatables, and the like. Surrounded by male admirers, she and her beaux were naked as snakes. So was everyone else frolicking on the sand and amidst the waves. A block of big text floating in the blue sky proclaimed: "My beer is Rheingold — the dry beer!" Pictured in a border at the bottom, along with further text on the virtues of Rheingold, were a squat bottle and thick-lipped can of the product, arranged in a still life with a package of rubbers. Small type read:

*Brewed by Liebmann Breweries, est. 1837*
*Miss Rheingold's hair styled by Slipstick Studios*

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*Prophylactics donated by B.F. Goodrich*
*Remember: Surgeon General Kinsey says,*
*"Only you can help eliminate VD!"*

There was a sandwich consisting of carbon paper between some bond and onionskin rolled into the loudly humming typewriter. On it was typed author's name, address, and the title of a story:

*Henry Gallagher*
*1212 Flatbush Avenue*
*Brooklyn, NY*

*SEX SLAVES OF THE SPACEWAYS*
*by*
*Carter Burrows*

The typewriter carriage quivered, as if eagerly waiting for the first word of the story to appear. In fact, the whole typewriter seemed to throb with the power of its small nucleonic motor.

A radio was on, delivering the play-by-play for a Dodgers game. "And now, a word from owner Branch Rickey—" The Dodgers were away from home, on the West Coast, and the broadcast — live by satellite — was poor quality.

A loud belch erupted over the static, followed by the sound of a can — presumably of beer; presumably Rheingold — being crushed.

A man stumbled over to the Philco radio and leaned on the huge cabinet for support. The wood of the cabinet was warm from the Sylvania vacuum tubes that glowed within.

The man wore a white sleeveless undershirt and baggy G.I.-surplus khakis belted tightly around his slim waist. His feet were bare. His black hair was uncombed, his face stubbled, his dove-gray eyes bleary. He whacked the radio with the flat of his palm, soft at first, then harder. When the reception did not improve, he began to fiddle with the tuner. Stations flowed in and out of audibility, news segueing into commercials into soap operas and comedies. Allen's Alley, Spike Jones, Ozzie and Harriet, Eddie Cantor and the Mad Russian. A familiar strain of music popped up, and the man stopped playing with the dial.

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"I love this fuckin' song," he said drunkenly, and turned up the volume. "The Merry Macs — there was a fuckin' band!" He began to jitterbug clumsily around the room, knocking into the shabby furniture, while the singer sang:

*Mairzy doats and dozey doats,*
*And little lambsie divey.*
*A kiddley divey, too,*
*Wouldn't you?*

There was a knock at the door.

"C'mon in!" yelled the man.

The door was opened by a young woman. She wore a light pink angora sweater, madras skirt, pink ankle sox, and saddle shoes. Her moderate-length blonde hair was done up like Joan Blondell's.

The man grabbed the woman around the waist and began to whirl her about.

"Little Lambsie Divey, Little Lambsie Divey!" he called out, as if that were her name.

The woman seemed exasperated, but allowed the man to spin her around. Eventually she started to participate willingly. The man swung her legs off the floor and high into the air. Her skirt fell down around her torso, revealing thick white cotton underwear that extended from her navel to well down below her buttocks. He set her upright on her feet and quickly shot her backward between his outspread legs. He spun around to face her, and she jumped up to wrap her legs around his waist. Off-balance, the man staggered backward under her weight, and they fell, sideways onto the unmade bed as the song ended.

"Let's screw, Little Lambsie Divey," said the man.

Pushing him away, Little Lambsie Divey said, "Oh Hank, forget it. You're drunk again, and you know how I feel about that."

"Am not," Hank said petulantly.

Little Lambsie Divey waved at the eight crushed beer cans on the floor. "Who drank these?"

"Little green men."

"Little green men can kiss my ass."

"I bet they'd just love to." Hank lunged at Little Lambsie Divey, but

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she rolled away off the bed and to her feet, leaving Hank clutching the pillow instead.

Little Lambsie Divey brushed the folds of her skirt into place. Hank lay still with his face in the pillow.

"Oh Elsie, my head hurts. . . ."

Elsie looked down at Hank unsympathetically. "It's your own fault. I'm going to make some instant Maxwell House for us. Maybe it'll pep you up."

Elsie walked toward the kitchen. On her way past the table that bore the typewriter, she stopped to read the page in the machine. Shaking her head, she toggled off the nucleonic motor — the machine made a diminishing whine, like a dynamo running down — then disappeared into the kitchen.

There was the sound of running water and the soft ignition of a gas flame on the Crosley range, followed by the opening of the door of the Kelvinator refrigerator. In a short time, Elsie returned with two steaming mugs of milk-tinctured coffee.

"Sit up and take this."

Hank slowly assumed as much of a vertical position as he could, until he sat with forearms on his thighs, hands dangling between his knees, spine and head bent forward.

Elsie wrapped his fingers around the mug. "Drink," she ordered. Hank complied. Elsie sat down beside him.

Together they sipped at their coffee in silence for a minute or so.

"Hank. What's the matter?"

"You know darn well."

"The writing?"

"What the hell else?"

"Well, why do you keep on churning out that awful stuff? 'Sex Slaves of the Spaceways'. . . . You know as well as I do that it's all junk."

"There's a market for it, and it pays the rent. Sixty dollars a month, don't forget."

"But it's killing you. Face facts. You hate it."

"Everyone hates their job."

"I don't mind mine so much."

"You were destined for it. Goddamn parents named you after that fuckin' cartoon Borden's cow."

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"Advertising is honest work."

"So's sellin' dope."

"Listen, let's forget my job. Why don't you start on that novel you keep talking about?"

Hank looked up with wild eyes. "Novel! Swell. . . . Who'd buy it? Not the magazines, not if I do it right. If I get down on paper half of what I've got in my skull, they wouldn't touch it. The editors and readers may not know shit from Shinola, but they know heresy when they read it. And that's what I intend to write. A story of the real future, not one of these wish-fulfillment escapist fantasies set ten thousand years from now. No, my book wouldn't be one of those. For one thing, it'd be told from the perspective of the street. No rich Harvard boys or millionaire's dilettante sons with jutting jaws. The hero'd be a real lowlife, living right here in New York." Hank laughed bitterly. "My God, I know enough about that particular slice of life to get it right. And for another thing, I'd extrapolate from all the real science people are doing right now, stuff that no one's picking up on. There's this guy named Claude Shannon at Bell Labs, just invented something he calls information theory. I hardly understand it myself, but I've got a hunch it's gonna be big. And then there's Linus Pauling's work with the alpha helix— Do you realize that we could be on the verge of understanding the mechanics of inheritance? I know nucleonics is important, but this other stuff— Jesus!"

Hank was staring up at the ceiling now, as if seeing the text of his novel engraved in fiery letters on the flaking plaster. Elsie reached over to hold his hands. She stared at him worshipfully.

"Oh Hank, I love you so much when you let your real self shine through. Forget whether you'll ever sell the novel or not, and just write it!"

"I don't know, Elsie; I just don't know. Sometimes I think I'm a genius; other times I think I'm just restating the obvious, the stuff that's all around us. But if that's so, why can't anyone else see it? My God, it's everywhere." Hank's gaze fell on a copy of *Life* splayed open on the bed, and he grabbed it. "Look, look at this. Man, that Henry Luce has his finger right on the goddamn pulse of the times. This magazine contains more real science fiction than a dozen issues of *Astounding*."

Hank began to riffle the pages. Here was a new fog machine that sprayed the wonder insecticide DDT more efficiently. A smiling girl in a bikini ate her hot dog and sipped her soda pop while immersed in a harm-

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less cloud of the chemical. On another page was the newest product from Seeburg Corporation: the Select-o-Matic, a nine-foot-long record rack with traveling tonearm for the home that would hold hundreds of shellac discs and play them in any order. Television from GE that could actually be viewed in the daylight. Miracle plastics like Koroseal that promised to alter everything from upholstery to underwear.

Slapping the magazine closed, Hank said, "And I haven't even begun to talk about the changing cultural values yet. This new sexual permissiveness that the president and Kinsey have unleashed, the consumerism you advertising folks are breeding — everything feeds on everything else—"

"Oh Hank, kiss me. . . ."

The crescent dial on the streamlined Philco glowed warmly. Louella Parsons's voice issued from the cloth-covered speakers, talking of Broadway and Hollywood. There was the sound of springs creaking, the ripping open of a small Koroseal package. Nat "King" Cole came on after Parsons to sing his latest hit, "Nature Boy." Cole's mellow baritone glided over the sighs and yelps and exclamations.

The sounds of sleep — steady breathing; the slow, unconscious shuffle of limbs across sheets; the slight smacking of lips — was counterpointed by the songs of Spike Jones and his Orchestra. Washtub, band saw, and siren. . . .

A polite, persistent tapping on the door to Hank's apartment gradually made itself heard in a brief interval of radio silence.

"Hank, Hank, wake up, there's someone knocking."

"Huh, what, what's the matter? Oh, all right, hold on, I'm coming. Jesus, you'd think they'd had a dose of sal hepatica or something."

Hank walked to the door. He was bare-chested, and his unbuckled belt flopped like a dog's tongue.

On the far side of the door stood a black man. Of an age with Hank and Elsie, he had a bright, affable face beneath close-cropped hair. He wore the brown coveralls of the Civilian Service Corps and heavy work boots covered with plaster dust. Embroidered above his breast pocket was his rank and name: PRIVATE DWIGHT HOWARD.

"Oh Dwight, it's just you."

"Yowzuh, Mistuh Benny, it's jus' ol' Rochester."

"Dwight."

"Yowzuh?"

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"Shut up and come in."

Dwight stepped into the apartment. His sharp eyes took in the accumulated disorder, and he clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Henry, you live worse than the folks we're helping up in Harlem. I don't know how you stand it. Hello, Elsie."

Elsie looked up from zipping her skirt. "Hi, Dwight."

Hank's head emerged from his undershirt. "I live the life of the mind, you ignorant savage. This world is all illusion, maya. Means nothing."

"I sho nuff don't dig all them big words, Mistuh Gallagher, but I spoze if'n you say so—"

Hank snorted. "Dwight, did you come here just to bust my balls?"

"No way, Henry. Look." Dwight removed a zippered Koroseal pouch from his pocket.

"Reefer," said Elsie in awe.

"Is it any good?" asked Hank.

"It's the same stuff Robert Mitchum smokes," said Dwight.

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

Hank tossed some cushions to the floor, and the friends flopped down. Pretty soon the room was wreathed in bluish smoke and smelled like a Mexican wedding.

"I feel so dreamy," said Elsie. "Like I'm a song by Sinatra."

Everyone nodded in agreement, smiling sleepily.

"This stuff is better than Camels for your T-Zone," said Dwight.

They all burst into giggles and laughter.

Dwight said, "Hey, here's a good one I heard at work today. What's the most popular song in Paris right now?"

"I give up," said Elsie. "What?"

"'Glow, Little Glowworm.'"

"Oh, that's sick!"

"How's the work, Dwight?" asked Hank after he had recovered from laughing and had a few more reflective puffs.

"Good, good. We're tearing down them slums, man, and building nice new housing for all the poor folks. You know who was there at the opening of the latest units? General Eisenhower and Secretary Du Bois. It done my heart good to see a famous white man and a famous black man side by side like that. Couldn't never've happened under no other president, either."

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The three were silent for a moment. Then Dwight said, "Henry, why don't you join the CSC? The hitch is only two years, and the change might do you good. I know you're up against some troubles lately. Hell, I ain't seen nothing of yours in the magazines since that thing last year. What was it. 'Raiders of the Rings'? And it weren't no masterpiece."

"Screw you, Dwight. You haven't liked anything of mine since that first story you read that made you come visit me."

Elsie interrupted, "Hank, you know something, that might not be such a bad idea. The time away from writing might do you good."

"Yeah, listen to the lady, Henry. Besides, don't you want to vote, it being an election year and all?"

"No. Not under those terms. You know that's the one thing I don't agree with our beloved president on. Restricting the vote to military vets and those who've pulled a hitch in the CSC. It's contrary to the whole history of this country. No, forget it. Me and the CSC just wouldn't jive."

"My throat's dry," said Elsie. "I'm going to get us some beers."

"Good idea."

Elsie went into the kitchen. Her voice, muffled by the presence of her head inside the Kelvinator, soon came back to the men.

"Hank, you're out of Rheingold."

"What else is there?"

"Hamm's, Pabst, Red Cap, Blatz. . . ."

"Gimme a Blatz."

"I'll take a Hamm's, Elsie."

Elsie returned with three cold bottles and a church key. Just as she finished prying the last lid off, there came a knocking at the door.

"Jesus Christ," said Hank, climbing unsteadily to his feet. "What is this, old home week? Who is it?!"

"Western Union."

Everyone flinched with the involuntary reflexes acquired during the recent war years, when the arrival of a telegram usually meant the cold news of death. Hank got unsteadily to his feet and went to open the door.

The man who stood there appeared uncommonly old to be a messenger. A Western Union name tag identified him as H. MILLER. Seeming to sense Hank's confusion at his age, the messenger said, "I'm the boss, but we're shorthanded. Besides, I figured I could use the tip more than some kid. I got one wife at home, mister, and an ex screaming for her alimony."

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"I'll see what I can do," said Hank, taking the telegram. He retreated into the room and bummed a dollar off Elsie.

"Thanks, buddy," said H. Miller.

Alone again, the three friends stared at the telegram.

"Open it, Hank, open it."

Its envelope slit, the telegram read:

> GREETINGS FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:
>
> PURSUANT TO THE PROVISIONS OF THE HOAG-WALDO ACT, YOUR SERVICES ARE REQUIRED BY THE COUNTRY. PLEASE BE READY TO LEAVE WITH GOVERNMENT ESCORT AT 17:00 EDT, JUNE 30, 1948.
>
> THANK YOU.

Why that's only an hour from now," exclaimed Elsie.

Hank appeared shell-shocked. "I can't believe this. What could they want a washed-up hack like me for?"

"I don't know, Hank, but you'd better get ready."

Dwight and Elsie escorted Hank into the bathroom. They stuck him under a cold shower and left him to sober up. With the aid of Gillette Blue Blades, Ipana toothpaste, and some Vaseline Hair Tonic, he soon looked as presentable as possible.

Towel wrapped around his midruff, Hank came back into the front room. Elsie had laid out his best clothes: an Arrow rayon "Sumara Sports" shirt, a pair of pleated gabardine trousers, and some argyle sox. Unfortunately, the only footwear Hank owned was a pair of Keds.

As he was tying his shoes, the fourth knock of the day sounded.

Dwight went to open the door.

Two Marine MPs stood there, immaculate from their epaulets down to their spit-polished boots. They were obviously hardy veterans, each wearing several voting stripes indicating multiple enfranchisement.

"Mr. Gallagher?" said one of the Marines.

"Nosuh, no way, not me, dat's him, dat's the guy you're looking for, yowsuh."

The troopers entered and closed the door.

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"Do the pickup orders specify these other two?" one said to the other.

"Nope."

"What do you think we should do with them?"

"I don't know. I've never seen such a high security code on a pickup before. . . ."

"I say we bring them, too. Better safe than sorry."

"O.K." The senior MP turned to face the three friends. "Miss, Private Howard — I'm afraid you'll have to accompany Mr. Gallagher. Chances are it'll only be a temporary inconvenience."

Hank spoke up. "Can I at least ask where we're going?"

"I think you're entitled to know that. We're going to the capital."

"Denver?"

"That's right. Mr. Gallagher, I suggest you bring your toothbrush."

Parked in front of the building was a large black Packard, the latest model. Powered by its own nucleonic engine, sporting twin radar cones on its front bumpers, government insignia stenciled discreetly on its doors, it was a sleek and powerful-looking machine.

One Marine opened the rear door, while the other got in behind the wheel. Hank, Elsie, and Dwight clambered stiffly inside. Hank's toothbrush, sticking up out of his breast pocket, poked him in the nose.

The door slammed, the second MP climbed inside, and they were off.

The traffic was fairly thick at this hour. Flatbush Avene was filled with Nashes, Crosleys, Studebakers, Mercuries. All the '48 models were atomic-powered and radar-warned against inadvertent collisions.

The sidewalks were filled with cheerful citizens: fedora-topped men, boys wearing cloth Jughead hats, little girls in frilly pink dresses, women in their open-toed, high- and thick-heeled pumps. Their innocent enjoyment of the beautiful June afternoon contrasted sharply with the chilly atmosphere felt by the three friends as they sped to their unknown appointment with destiny. Hank himself felt too confused even to take his normal pleasure in the see-through Pliofilm blouses worn by the more adventurous followers of fashion.

Looking nervously up through the car window, Hank saw a giant four-engine Pan Am Clipper soaring through the skies.

"Are we driving to Denver?" he thought to ask.

The Marines chuckled. "No way, Mr. Gallagher; it's first class for you."

Down to the Brooklyn Navy Yards they motored, passing through

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a security check and finally pulling up alongside a dock.

Floating in the water was an enormous wooden airplane, the creation of Hughes Aircraft and known jocularly as *The Spruce Goose*. Constructed shortly after Hughes had finished filming *The Outlaw* with Jane Russell in 1941, it had been donated by the aviation genius to the U.S. Government, and now served as the president's personal transportation.

"They said it'd never fly," one of the MPs commented. "But they didn't reckon with nucleonics."

Hank and his companions now ascended a gangway up into the main passenger compartment of the titanic plane. Once inside, the Marines formally transferred their charges to the supervision of two members of the Presidential Honor Guard.

The Presidential Honor Guard was an elite force consisting of specially selected WACs chosen for their martial-arts skills and combat experience. All over five and a half feet tall, they wore a uniform made of Koroseal fabric and designed by the president himself, notable mainly for its extreme tightness.

"Please be seated, and fasten your restraining straps," said one of the Guards.

Hank, Elsie, and Dwight took three horsehair-covered seats in a row. Designed to hold 750 passengers, the empty plane — with its miles of aisles stretching forward and back — possessed a ghostly air. Fumblingly, the trio buckled the leather seat belts around their waists and across their chests and cinched them tight. Even as they did so, they felt the plane begin to move.

"Do you think we're going to meet the president himself?" asked Elsie.

"Everything sure points to that," said Hank.

"If we see the man," said Dwight, "I'm going to tell him how he uplifted the race by making Du Bois secretary of housing."

"I think we'd best let the president dictate the conversation," said Elsie.

The forces of acceleration steadily increased as the giant plane taxied down the bay, and the passengers were pressed into their seats. The moment of lift-off was plainly perceptible. After a while, when the craft had stabilized, one of the Guards indicated that they could unfasten their restraints and roam about, which they did, marveling at the luxurious appointments of the presidential plane.

In an hour or so, the pilot's voice crackled over the onboard PA system.

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"We're passing over the ruins of Washington now, which can be seen out the starboard windows."

Hank, Elsie, and Dwight hastened to look. Even from their height, they could see the overgrown crumbled buildings, destroyed in the last-ditch Nazi attack of three years ago: a barrage of V-4's launched from just off the U.S. coast by German subs.

"Do you think it'll ever be rebuilt?" asked Elsie.

"I doubt it," said Hank. "I hear the president likes Denver too much."

Soon the novelty of the flight transformed itself inexplicably into boredom, and the friends sat desultorily in their seats, each privately wondering what the future was to bring. Elsie held Hank's hand.

Midway through the flight, the WACs served a rough meal consisting of Treet sandwiches on Wonder Bread and choice of Royal Crown Cola or hot mugs of Ovaltine. Afterward Hank and the others dozed off.

They awoke many hours later, feeling considerably refreshed. The Guards were ready with hot coffee, and the news that they would shortly be landing in Denver.

"The *Goose* is too heavy for its landing gear," one WAC told them, "So we'll be touching down in Lake Lyle, an artificial body of water on the outskirts of the city."

Their unseen pilot was soon expertly guiding them to a landing, plowing a huge furrow in the body of Lake Lyle.

It was night in Denver. The lights of the unsleeping city, new nerve center of the nation, were visible across the waters as Hank and the others disembarked on shaky legs. Waiting for them on dry land was another government car. They were quickly bundled into the vehicle by the Guards, who joined them in the spacious backseat. Hank found himself pressed between two Koroseal-slick female figures, and the object of a glare from Elsie.

From the plane now stepped the man who had obviously been their pilot. Wearing an aviator's white scarf, leather bomber jacket, and Ray-Ban sunglasses (despite the darkness), he cut an imposing figure. Moving with feline economy of motion, he slipped behind the wheel of the car and quickly brought its powerful nucleonic motor to life.

"O.K., cats and kittens," said the pilot in a flippant manner, "hold on to your tails. I was fighting a head wind all the way here, and it's past the president's bedtime. Can't keep him waiting any longer."

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# Seated confidently behind his broad desk sat President Heinlein.

Toggling on their radar and engaging the gears, the pilot roared off in a stench of burning rubber.

Through the streets of the mountain-embraced city they sped. Past the Mint, the houses of Congress, the innumerable buildings of lesser government agencies, until finally arriving at the gates of the new White House, a huge timber structure built in the style of a western hunting lodge.

Hank, Dwight, and Elsie soon found themselves sitting nervously in an anteroom outside the Oval Office, flanked by several of the Presidential Guards. Framed and hung on the walls were various newspaper clippings highlighting the president's swift rise to the highest office in the land.

From 1939 was the tiny notice announcing his first electoral victory: winning a seat in the California state assembly.

The next four years were represented by increasingly larger headlines in the California press, all detailing the bold initiatives the young assemblyman had spearheaded.

In 1943 the brash, antimachine newcomer had staged a fantastic upset over Earl Warren, becoming governor of California.

The very next year, he had been chosen as FDR's running mate, as the heroic and crippled wartime leader embarked on his campaign for an unprecedented fourth term.

The ticket combining youth and experience had won handily. Then, tragedy. On April 12, 1945, Roosevelt died, transforming a man whose first political victory had come a mere six years earlier into leader of the free world.

The rest was history.

The door to the Oval Office swung partway open, and a Guard poked out her head.

"The president will see Mr. Gallagher and his friends now."

Hank and the others shuffled nervously in.

An active television receiver sat in one corner of the office, tuned softly to a late news broadcast. Edward Murrow was recounting the latest developments in the treason trial of Joseph McCarthy, and the disbanding, by presidential order, of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Seated confidently behind his broad desk, looking as bright-eyed and

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energetic as if he had just wakened from a good night's sleep, sat President Heinlein. A smile bloomed beneath his famous pencil-thin mustache as he stood and came around to shake hands with his guests.

"Citizens, take a seat. I know you're wondering why I've dragged you halfway across the country, so I'll get right down to brass tacks. Mr. Gallagher — I want you to go on a little expedition I'm planning. And God help me if I don't wish it were I going instead of you."

Hank was baffled. "Expedition? Where to?"

"To the Moon, Mr. Gallagher. Old Mistress Luna, that is."

"The Moon? But I thought —"

President Heinlein held up a hand. "I know what you thought, Mr. Gallagher, because it's what everyone thinks. But remember, if everyone 'knows' such and such, then it ain't so, by a factor of ten thousand to one. Like the rest of the herd, you believed that America's current space capability consists of lofting a few pounds of communications satellite into orbit, that sending human beings into space was too costly and dangerous a proposition. Well, all that would be true, if I had let my hands be tied and done what those spineless boneheads in Congress had told me to. But fortunately for our country — for the whole race, I believe — I paid no attention to those mollycoddled muddleheads, and therefore our nation now possesses true spaceflight capability. And at a time when we urgently need it."

"Need it? Why?" asked Hank.

"Mr. Gallagher — there are others who also recognized the value of space travel. They saw its utility earlier than we did, but only its military applications. And, unburdened by the necessary restrictions of our democratic system, using slave labor, they achieved it. Mr. Gallagher, those people are on the Moon right this minute, and preparing to reignite the conflict that almost destroyed civilization, until I reluctantly gave the orders for the radioactive dusting of Europe and Japan. And believe me, despite what you'll hear certain so-called 'pacifists' say, it was not something that I did without grievous moral trepidation. Just because I didn't chuck everything like Einstein did and move to Palestine doesn't mean I didn't have plenty of sleepless nights. But there ain't no such thing as a free lunch, children."

"You can't mean —"

"Yes, Mr. Gallagher. I'm talking about the Nazis. Tojo, Axis Sally,

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Goering, perhaps even the head madman himself. They did not perish, as we believed in the confusion of the war's ending, but instead escaped, after fleeing to the base at Peenemünde and the interplanetary rocket awaiting them there. And now they command the high ground above our defenseless heads, where they are undoubtedly feverishly working to complete the mechanism of our destruction. Mr. Gallagher, do you have any notion of what a good-sized chunk of moonrock kicked into our gravity well would do? We have to strike now, mop them up before they can hold the whole planet hostage."

Hank's head was spinning. "All right, Mr. President, I can see all that. But what's my part in such an expedition?"

"I want someone along who really understands the meaning of space for humanity, and can chronicle this historic flight in an exciting manner. Mr. Gallagher, I believe you're that man. I've read your stories — yes, don't look so surprised; I almost got into your racket myself once — and I think you've got a real vision of what the future could be, if only humanity would exert its full potential. You're the man I want to record this journey for posterity. The eventual publication of your narrative should serve to awaken the Average Joe to his real birthright."

Here the president winked broadly at his audience. "And in an election year like this one, when I'm facing some stiff competition from Henry Wallace and his upstarts, don't think some of the glory I know you'll invoke won't reflect back on me."

Hank looked to Elsie, and then to Dwight. Returning his gaze to the president, he straightened his back in his chair.

"Mr. President — I accept."

"Good, good, I knew my judgment was sound. Now, there remains the problem of your friends here." The president leaned over and spoke into an intercom. "The files on D. Howard and E. Long, please."

Shortly a woosh and a thump signaled the arrival, via pneumatic tube, of the papers in question. President Heinlein removed the capsule from the delivery tube and extracted two folders.

"Hmm, yes, yes, good parents, commendable civic sense — I think they'll do. Private Howard, Miss Long, would you care to accompany your friend Mr. Gallagher on your country's business?"

Elsie and Dwight nodded solemnly, and the president flashed his beneficent smile once more.

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"Wonderful. Now, I realize a motion to adjourn is always in order, but I would just like to introduce a few of your traveling companions who happen to be waiting next door. Including the two men you'll be entrusting your lives to."

The president pushed a button, and into the room stepped three people: the man who had flown Hank, Elsie, and Dwight from New York, accompanied by a younger sidekick who could have been his brother. With them was a gorgeous red-haired woman stylishly dressed.

Indicating the original pilot, the president said, "Citizens, let me introduce twenty-five-year-old Commander Chuck Yeager, an ace pilot during the war and now a member of the U.S. Space Authority. He'll be assisted by a local Denver boy, Copilot Neal Cassady. I myself found Neal four years ago, when he was an eighteen-year-old doing time in reform school for car theft. When I heard how that boy could drive, I knew he was the kind of material we needed in the Space Authority. You can count on their reflexes to bring you safely through the perils of the Heaviside layer, the Van Allen belts, and meteors thick as flies around a hog. And I think you'll probably recognize this lovely lady as Miss Rheingold, Anita Mann. Miss Mann is going to be representing the USO on this mission."

Everyone shook hands all around, although Hank was singled out with a kiss from Miss Rheingold, who whispered something in his ear that caused him to blush and Elsie to scowl.

With a gesture the president dismissed the fly-boys and entertainer. "Any other questions, before our *ave atque vale*?"

"When do we leave?" asked Hank.

"Tomorrow. Now, if that does it, you'll be shown to your quarters for a good night's rest. Remember, as my fellow Missourian General Truman said, just before he bought the farm at Verdun thirty years ago: 'You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. Don't ever count on having both at once.'"

With the stirring words of President Heinlein ringing in their ears, the trio went off to a surprisingly untroubled sleep, considering all the excitement they had been through.

In the morning they were conducted once again to the floating *Spruce Goose*. This time the plane was loaded to capacity with a complement of soldiers, composed of equal numbers of men and women, from all branches of the armed forces, including the Presidential Guard. Hank and the others

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found three seats left untaken, and buckled themselves in with the familiarity of longtime passengers.

"I don't see no other black folks," said Dwight. "It appears I'm going to be the sole representative of Negritude on this mission. It's a heavy burden."

"I'll try to convey your importance adequately in my manuscript," said Hank dryly.

Elsie was staring intently ahead at the far bulkhead, behind which Commander Yeager and Copilot Cassady were even now going through their pretakeoff sequence.

"I've never seen anyone so self-assured as that Neal Cassady," she said dreamily, but with a calculating gleam in her eye.

Now it was Hank's turn to glare. Dwight just laughed.

The plane lifted off, a bit more reluctantly with its full load, and began winging west. Hank failed to learn their destination from his neighbors, and resigned himself to patient waiting.

After many hours in flight, several Presidential Guards began circulating, dispensing fur-lined jackets obviously intended for arctic conditions.

Out the windows, only ocean was visible. Then in the distance appeared a white smudge. Closer, closer, until it resolved itself into a huge floating iceberg. Even at this distance, it could be seen that the iceberg's top was artificially level and cluttered with structures. One structure towered above the others. Soon this titanic pillar resolved itself into a missile shape briefly visible. Then the top of the iceberg rose out of view as the plane dropped toward the surface of the ocean for a landing.

Splashdown was swiftly followed by an orderly exodus. Small boats ferried the plane's passengers to the floating base.

Riding with Neal Cassady, the wind pushing back their hoods, Hank heard the Copilot explain to Elsie, who was holding his arm and hanging on his every word, "The atomic jets are so hot, they'll melt the whole damn ice cube when we blast off! A 'berg was the only way to go."

Soon they were atop the tremendous iceberg and inside a chilly Quonset hut. There they underwent a brief lecture by a trio of ex-Nazi scientists named Oberth, von Braun, and Dornberger, who explained certain essential facts about space travel. The lack of gravity, cosmic rays, how to deal with emergency hull punctures. A space suit was brought out and its use demonstrated. Weighing five hundred pounds, the suit looked like a deep-

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sea diving apparatus. Bulbous Koroseal joints at elbows and knees; two air canisters on the back from which thick hoses fed into a transparent helmet that looked like a Victorian bell jar; clumsy, mitten-type gauntlets; a radio antenna that terminated in a loop.

Then, with scarcely a second to collect their thoughts, after changing their civilian clothes for utilitarian coveralls and magnetic shoes, and receiving a complimentary pack of Old Gold cigarettes and one of condoms, Hank and the others found themselves ready to board the rocket.

As they filed across the frozen surface of the glacier, the rocket loomed huge over them. A dull gray monolith tapering to a needle point, it rested on three streamlined fins that emerged from three-quarters of the way up its hull. It was as massive and brooding as Mount Rushmore, the obvious apex of twentieth-century technological progress. A single central jet protruded from its bottom. A gangway extended from its open hatch.

Once on board, the trio were conducted to adjacent couches, thickly padded to accommodate the tremendous gee-forces that would build up during the launch.

Strapped down, Hank still managed to reach out a few inches and brush Elsie's similarly outstretched fingers. Elsie turned her head to gaze at Hank.

"I'm sorry if I made you jealous with Neal, Hank. I don't know what came over me. Probably just the way that pinup girl Anita was practically draping herself all over you. Why, you know I could never fall for anyone but you. If it was anything, it was just a schoolgirl crush or something. Why, I think you're the most important man on this mission. Imagine having the responsibility for preserving the details of this historic trip for all of posterity."

"And you're the most important woman, Elsie. At least to me."

"Man, I think I'm gonna throw up," said Dwight.

"We're not even moving yet," Hank reminded him.

"I know."

Over the shipboard loudspeaker, a countdown was initiated, the calm voice of Neal Cassady reciting the numbers. At the mark of three, with an awesome roar of atomic flames, the motors came alive, activated by the capable hands of Commander Yeager. The iceberg had been abandoned by all remaining personnel, who had departed in the *Spruce Goose*. It was time for takeoff.

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The growl of the nucleonic motors surged, and the rocket began to rip itself away from the grip of the Earth.

At the height of the gee-forces, Hank and his friends blacked out.

When they came to, they were weightless. Looking around, they saw others rising from their couches, and so quickly freed themselves.

From the intercom came the voice of Commander Yeager.

"Good ol' Mama Earth's behind us now, folks. ETA on a nest of Nazi rats approximately thirty-six hours from now. I don't know about the rest of you, but your pilot's gonna have a bulb of java. Keep your sights clean, and smoke 'em if you got 'em."

There was a rousing cheer from the spaceship troopers, and as the comely Presidential Guards began to pass out the promised drinks, the cabin filled with clouds of tobacco smoke.

The rest of the trip passed in a dream for Hank. So busy making copious notes for his narrative, he hardly noticed when Elsie disappeared for a time, coincidentally when Copilot Cassady was also nowhere to be found. When Dwight brought Elsie's absence to Hank's attention, Hank was still too elated to let it trouble him.

"This is the future we're living in now, Dwight. Morals have to change with the time, not just technology."

"You're some kind of saint, man."

Hank smiled. "Hardly, Dwight. But I figure that after what Anita and I just did in the space-suit locker, I can hardly complain about Elsie having a little fun. Besides, I kind of like that Neal Cassady, too. He seems like a real man's man."

Dwight scratched his head and grinned slyly. "I think I'm gonna talk to Miss Anita and ask her opinion about improvin' relations between the races."

Hank tossed Dwight his remaining safeties, which floated slowly through the cabin air. "Don't forget these, buddy."

At midpoint the mighty rocket turned majestically for deceleration, so that its jet pointed toward their destination. The ghostly mottled white sphere that had steadily swelled to fill the two-foot-thick vitreous windows of the control room was replaced by the dwindling blue ball of their home planet. The sight, witnessed by the passengers in groups of ten, stirred each to the depths of his or her soul. Even the mathematician squad, perpetually busy with their flashing slide rules, calculating and recal-

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culating the complicated ballistics of their course, stopped to stare with powerful emotions tugging at them.

After this, there was little of note for Hank to record, save for a close brush with a rogue asteroid, from which only the youthful reflexes of Yeager and Cassady, honed by hours of eluding Messerschmidts and Denver cops, served to save them.

At last they were in orbit around the Moon, and strapped down to their couches in anticipation of landing. The intercom between passengers and crew was purposefully left open, so that the passengers could hear the progress of their descent.

"Locked on to the coordinates for Schickelgruber's base, Chuck."

"Adopt evasive maneuvers, Neal. No telling what defenses they've got."

"Check. Say, radar doesn't reveal any sizable structures where the boss told us they'd be."

"They're probably dug into the rock, Neal. With any luck we'll set down right on top of 'em and burn the nest out. Save our boys and girls any hand-to-hand work."

"Yeah, but what about their rocket? I don't get a reading on no vessel—"

Slowly, the American rocket lowered itself like a cautious, overweight matron to the gritty Selene surface. Hank felt a small weight returning to him. Only when the atomic motors had been shut off did everyone realize how the motors had formed a permanent background noise to their trip.

The soldiers jumped to their feet, ready to don their vacuum gear as they had practiced on the trip out, and engage the Nazis in combat. They were halted by the voice of Commander Yeager.

"Incoming transmission, folks. And it's on the presidential channel. Hold on; I'm routing it to all cabin television screens."

The grainy black-and-white face of President Heinlein appeared. Behind him was the Presidential Seal.

"Citizens and soldiers, congratulations on your safe arrival on the Moon.

"It is with the deepest sympathy — and, at the same time, profoundest happiness — that I now wish to inform you that you will not be returning.

"The experimental material lining your jet tube has deteriorated during the trip to the point of uselessness. Unfortunately, it's a little problem our scientists have yet to solve. Were you to reignite the jets, the ship

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would in all likelihood explode. However, the nucleonic motors themselves will still serve faithfully as a power source for your colony.

"That's correct. Your colony.

"Citizens, there are no Nazis on the Moon. They did indeed all die in the dustings. That particular threat no longer faces us. However, a much more subtle, yet equally powerful, one does.

"That threat is inertia. Sheer stubborn human laziness. Sated with the material comforts of our postwar economy, the average citizen has no interest whatsoever in funding — much less participating in — any attempt to colonize space. Like neutered tomcats, they are content to sit at home. Only through the ruse of a Nazi moonbase was I able to get secret funding for your trip. And now, lest you think I was shirking my share of duty by not accompanying you, I want to remind you that I'll have to face my own public inquisition back home, once this news leaks out, as I fully intend it to.

"But anything I have to endure will be worth it. Humanity cannot keep all its eggs in one basket. The solar system must be populated. With the nuclear death of Earth during some future war now a distinct possibility, we need the elbow room, to disperse our innate aggressions.

"All of you have been secretly chosen for your skills and genetic pedigree. You are prime colonist material, the equivalent of the pioneers who settled our own American West. Success is in your makeup. You will not fail.

"If you check you cargo holds, you'll find they've been stocked with everything you'll need until you get on your feet.

"So Earthmen — or, should I say, Loonies? — start digging your new homes!

"I'm sure there'll be another ship along in a few years, once the public wises up."

President Heinlein disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by a test pattern.

Elsie sighed. "Well, Hank, I guess we're really living that future you were so excited about now."

Hank threaded his fingers through his Vaseline-Tonicked hair. "I guess."

Dwight seemed unperturbed. "Seems like Miss Anita and me still got a chance to hit it off."

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The television screens suddenly flared into life. Commander Yeager must have managed to pick up a weak commercial broadcast.

It was the Merry Macs, singing "Mairzy Doats."

*If the words sound queer, and funny to your ear,*
*A little bit jumbled and jivey,*
*Sing, "Mares eat oats,"*
*And, "Does eat oats,"*
*And, "Little lambs eat ivy."*

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*John Griesemer's fiction has appeared in* Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine *and has been listed in* The Best Short Stories, *1983 and 1987. He is also an actor, having appeared on and off Broadway, on television and in feature films. His first F&SF story is a striking and unusual tale about survival at sea in the winter of 1830 . . .*

# The Breaking-Up Yard

**By John Griesemer**

IF YOU HAVE read this far, you should know that I have never intended these accounts for publication. I have written and placed them with my other effects so that you, my descendants — or kin, for I am sure to live out my life childless — will know something of their ancestor's experience as a ship's carpenter in the North Atlantic, and learn why he turned his back on his maritime livelihood and arrived at his current pass.

That I am likely to die childless is part of the dread and remorse I feel for the seafaring life after the Greenland tragedy of 1830. For it was the vision of a child — both the vision I beheld with my own eyes and the faculty of sight belonging to a young boy — that saved and changed my life forever during a winter on the frozen shelves of sea beyond the 75th parallel.

As my other papers attest, I am a native Mainer who for fifteen years was a journeyman carpenter shipping out of New Bedford and Portland for the northern fisheries. My reason for taking to the sea, my bouts with

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my father, are disclosed elsewhere in these papers for those kinsmen who care to know. Here I will concern myself with the dreadful winter of 1830, my last at sea. . . .

So many ships had failed to return to their home ports after the season of 1829 that by the following spring, all vessels setting out for northern waters were alert for grim discoveries. They were in no way prepared for what they found.

A score and a half of barks, brigs and brigantines — whalers and sealers all — had been destroyed by the ice of Melville Bay on the northwest coast of Greenland. A thousand men had been marooned.

If you believe the common accounts of our survival, you would hold with tales of a winter-long debauch on the ice, of ten times a hundred men in drunken revelry for weeks in a dark and frozen world. It has been years since that winter, and I would not dispute the reports of others, but in accounting for myself, I must attest to a more troubling version of events.

No doubt, one great shock to the rescuers who arrived in the spring was that so many experienced sailors could have been tricked by the ice the previous autumn. I can vouch, however, for the suddenness with which the floes moved in. Captains, helmsmen, and watches aloft searched desperately for passages through the maze of ever-decreasing channels. Longboats were lowered to pull the vessels in the tightening black canals of seawater. Crews climbed the ratlines and called from ship to ship offering suggestions and warnings: "What do you see?" "There! There! Make for it! A lead!" "No luck. Turn about."

As our plight became obvious, ships would rush for any swatch of open water, paying no regard as to whether the opening offered escape. Captains raged at their oarsmen. Ships converged on channels in the ice and collided. Curses rang out in the Arctic darkness. It had taken barely a single night for all the vessels in Melville Bay to become hopelessly trapped in a featureless plateau of white.

Then, as days passed, winter gathered her strength, and the ice field thickened. Soon the bay that had embraced us became a machine of destruction. The ice plain transformed into a screeching monstrosity of frozen cliffs and upheavals. We watched helplessly as our ships were squeezed until turpentine oozed from the timbers. Ribs and planking wailed before snapping from the pressure. Some vessels were smashed like chestnuts; others were pushed upward to pop from the ice like cherry

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stones. In the face of this danger, we spent weeks sleeping fully clothed, our possessions gathered on the decks, ready for our escape. We called our embayment with its destroyed flotilla The Breaking-Up Yard.

Once a craft had been wrecked by the ice, it existed neither in form nor article. By maritime law, such a vessel was mere rubble and no longer under the command of a master. Thus, we marooned men were "ashore," the ice having discharged us from our duties and our officers' dominion.

The wreckage of each ship became a village unto itself. Ceaseless fires were ignited with timbers from the shattered hulls. At any hour of the lightless day or night, a man could walk a few hundred rods from one encampment and come upon the roistering company of another ship, everyone idle or drunk, all devouring their vessel's stores.

My home on the ice was a small hermitage. It was in the lee of a frozen palisade roughly a half-mile from the *Pinhalter's Traverse*, my former ship. My shelter was made from barrels, planks, and snow. I fashioned windows from oilcloth, constructed a stove and chimney, even built a "veranda" and erected a flagpole from which to fly pennants. But most days and nights were too dark and too cold for my carpentry. I spent them inside, drinking the liquor I had smuggled aboard when shipping out, and had secreted in my hovel when our ship was destroyed.

From visitors, I began to hear increasingly of fights erupting in settlements and dwellings across the ice field. The tedium and hardship of winter had begun to inflame virtueless passions. Gradually reports of assaults and robberies circulated. Soon it became inadvisable for anyone to travel from ship to ship alone.

As I had heard accounts of men bludgeoned and robbed in their sleep, I, alone in my shelter, dwelled with the dilemma of either staying alert to protect myself or relieving the tedium and tension by drinking liquor and hoping for the Lord's protection bestowed on fools and drunks.

One night — or was it day? — I gave in to temptation. I imbibed and fell into a stuporous sleep, only to find myself quarry for the thieves. I was unmolested. Nevertheless, I lost a fine set of chisels, a watch, and a large bottle of whiskey.

The thief was adroit, but not flawless. The toppling of a crate awoke me, and I glimpsed a furtive apparition. I was drunk still, and unsure whether or not it was a trick of the light or my inebriation that made the thief appear so small, less than half the size of any one of our Greenland sailors.

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The thievery and brigandage occurred without pattern and went on unchecked for weeks. Suspicions were rampant, accusations rife. But still no culprits. Our settlement lacked the wherewithal to have anything remotely resembling a constabulary. Eventually, though, a band of sailors — mostly American, some British as well — began scouring the ice.

After three days the thieves were roused from their hiding place in a sort of ravine beyond all the settlements. They were discovered with piles of stolen possessions.

It turned out to be a paltry band of ruffians that had plundered our Breaking-Up Yard: two men and a boy, Americans. That so much robbery could have been wreaked by such a trio made the offended populace all the angrier. The culprits were dragged and cuffed and abused as a trial was extemporized. It was an occasion for curses and near riot that at any moment could have proven lethal for the trio before the bar. But the triumvirate of ships' captains who sat in judgment held sway, and as all the valuables had been returned and all knocked skulls knitted, the populace was satisfied with the sentence.

The punishment was five days in a pillory. The judges ordered me, as carpenter, to fashion the stocks, which I did by placing a broken deck rail on the highest promontory of ice. It was within shouting distance of my hermitage. I, therefore, became the jailer. I was to be paid in whiskey. I readily agreed to this.

When I saw them in their stocks, I could not help but think it was a corruption of Calvary I had built up there; three silhouettes hanging in clownish likeness of the three crucified in Jerusalem.

I brought my prisoners food and built a large fire the first night to provide warmth. They were in satisfactory condition when I checked them in the morning. I talked to them as I held bread for them to chew. The two men were ordinary seamen. The larger, named Bushrod, was from Boston, and the other, Skayling, was a native of Providence.

The boy with them was the son of a harpooner on the *Bede*. His father had perished when he'd been dragged overboard at the beginning of the previous season. The lad was a cabin boy and all of eleven years old. Whenever I spoke with him, he would look with apprehension to Bushrod in the next pillory. The boy would not answer my queries unless the man nodded. Skayling would only laugh in a rheumy clucking at everything I said.

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On the second day of the trio's imprisonment, the weather was mild and overcast. During daylight a flat grayness lay across the heavens, and the hue and light were absorbed by the snow, so there was no telling where the land ended and the sky began. I remarked upon this to the men, and there was the usual chuckle from the smaller and a grunt from the larger. The boy asked if he could be turned to face the sea.

I informed him that he was indeed facing that direction, and although he might not be able to discern the ocean, it was out there. I asked if there was any reason for his request. Bushrod said the boy wanted to be the first to spot a sail. The boy said that was true. I wished him luck and retired to my shelter.

A few wandering drunks that day came by to pelt the criminals with pieces of ice. I heard their shouting from my hut. The imprisoned, for their part, yelled back at their tormentors. Or at least the large seaman did. I could hear the mad cackles of the smaller man, and as for the boy, I was nearly certain he was weeping. But I confess I was drunk on whiskey, my jailor's fee, and I fell back to sleep.

When I regained consciousness that night and prepared to go to the hilltop to stoke my prisoners' fire, I was stopped short by a wonder of the Arctic. Now, any Greenland sailor has seen countless northern lights, but the aurora borealis I beheld that night was more radiant and more gigantic than anything I could have imagined. I gasped aloud as I stood on the threshold of my home.

THE PRISONERS' fire was dead, but I found my way to their hilltop easily in the massive, silent flutterings of brightness from above. Canyons of brilliant white, roseate, and bluish radiance pivoted about an axis directly over us, so that we seemed to be creatures at the bottom of a well of light, looking up at the highest reach of Heaven, a circle of perfect blackness.

Skayling was making a low humming sound as he stared at the sky. The boy wept still, but now it seemed his tears were almost joyful. The head of the larger man, Bushrod, was cocked back and over to one side, and when I stepped closer to him, I realized he was unconscious.

As I moved to examine him, I kicked together two empty whiskey bottles that rested below his pillory. No doubt he had begged or, more

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likely, bartered for the liquor from someone who had come to view the pillory during the day.

I built the fire up and used the opportunity to speak with the boy. I asked him if he had been hurt by his tormentors that afternoon. He looked over to the unconscious sailor. The boy whispered he had not. Had he been frightened? Yes, he had, and he began to weep again.

I untied him. I carried him down to my shelter, and there I fed him and offered him my pallet for sleep. I sat awake and stared out from a corner of the oilcloth at the colors alive in the sky. The boy stared, too, and fell asleep with a beatific smile. I felt peaceful. Eventually I fell asleep . . . and without liquor for the first time in countless days or nights.

I awoke before our meager dawn to notice that the aurora had disappeared. I carried the boy back in the darkness to the pillory and bound him as before. Bushrod was still unconscious; Skayling, asleep. The boy, too, was so exhausted he never roused.

The third day was brilliantly sunny. In the Arctic, such weather in the lengthening days of spring carries with it the gift of euphoria for men wintering over. After months of darkness, the return of the sun engenders such spirits of communality and joy that weeks of hardship are forgotten in a single morning. In The Breaking-Up Yard, men were out on the ice walking, engaging in footraces, tossing balls fashioned from old coats or sailcloth, even attempting to fly makeshift kites.

There is a danger, however, with this coming of the sun. When I arrived on their little calvary with some food, I saw the boy staring out toward the sea. It was a good three miles across the ice to the open water, so the lad was facing a broad expanse of severe whiteness limned by the black, farthest edge of Melville Bay. The sky that morning was a soft, hoary blue as an infinite number of ice crystals hung suspended throughout the atmosphere, refracting the light and making the very air itself cruelly luminous.

The men's eyes were closed. But upon hearing the squeak of my boots on the snow, Bushrod gruffly ordered me to tell the boy to cease staring out at the sea and snow. The man said he'd told both Skayling and the boy to keep their eyes shut lest they suffer snow blindness, but only the witless one had obeyed. The lad was still looking for something.

For what? I inquired of the boy. Without glancing at Bushrod, he whispered, "A sail."

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"His father!" Bushrod boomed. "He thinks he'll find his father come back to get him."

With that, Bushrod laughed and strained at his bonds. His hilarity transformed into a mighty thrashing. He soon drooped from exhaustion and emitted a low groan that became a chuckle. I listened to him as I ladled water into the mouth of the mad one, Skayling.

"You make good pillories, carpenter," Bushrod said. Then he noticed the neck of a bottle protruding from a pocket of my coat. He began to weep and beg for a drink. The warmth and brightness of the day must have made me beneficent — and perhaps it was also fear of what the man could do to me once his term was over — so I gave him the whole thing. He drank it off and fell into a happy swoon. I fed the boy, who kept his eyes closed through his meal. I then departed and returned to my shelter, where, knowing there was no need for a fire for my prisoners' warmth, I stayed out of the painful brilliance and again became slowly and stuporously drunk for the balance of the day.

In the late afternoon, I heard keening from the hilltop. It woke me. It was the boy crying, and I knew instantly why. He had opened his eyes after I had left, had stared throughout the day at the sea and ice, and was now suffering the pain of the snow-blind.

When I arrived at the hilltop, I saw that all three of my prisoners were severely burned by the sun. Their skin was a purplish red and blistered. Some of the pustules had broken. Their lips were swollen and almost black in places. The boy was the only one conscious, and he was weeping bitterly.

Witnessing the deplorable state of the trio, I decided to release them all. I did not wake the two men; I merely loosened their bonds. In this way, it could never be proved I was responsible for their freedom. The lad, though, I could not leave. I untied him and carried him down to my shelter.

As I entered my hut, I looked back to see the hill in twilight. The snow burned crimson and blue. The crazy man, Skayling, was stirring and no doubt would soon realize freedom was his. Bushrod, however, was already gone, and that troubled me, for I knew he certainly had seen me carrying the lad away toward my dwelling. I had hoped not to be discovered even by the men I had set free.

The boy's snow blindness was severe, but with enough cool compresses

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and darkness, he could recover. Still, he would not be exempt from the pain. I have heard descriptions of the blindness: One's eyes feel as if they have been packed in burning fragments of glass. One's entire being collapses into those two vortices of pain. You cannot even hear your own howling.

I applied the only medicine I had: I gave the boy my whiskey. He swooned with the spirits and his distress and slept for several hours. Sometime in the night, he awoke calling out for his father. I roused from sleep and held him. He was still blindfolded with compresses, but he was calling out, "I see you, Father! I see you!"

"Hush now. Hush," I said, but he strained against me, pushing toward whatever he envisioned in his blindness.

"I see you!" he kept crying. And then, in a burst of impossible strength, he tore the compresses from his eyes, sat upright, and stared directly at me, his blind eyes roving my face, but, I could tell, discerning nothing. Or at least discerning nothing of me and this world. He grew suddenly quiet and still. His gaze widened, and he pointed at me and stated simply: "On the bottom of the sea, at the top of the world . . . Father. . . ."

He lay back and slept.

For my part, I was unable to rest; such was the chill I felt at the eerie utterance of those words. It is never quieting to be in the presence of one possessed by a vision, no matter how ridiculous or mad. Such phantasms, when pointed out in the air around us, always leave us wondering.

So I sat with the boy, who barely moved for hours, and I told myself not to be moved by his . . . nonsense.

The next afternoon, one of the captains who had judged the trial arrived at my hovel, demanding I tell him the whereabouts of the prisoners.

I said I had no idea.

He told me not to dissemble, and reminded me that the trio still had a day and a half of their term to serve.

In light of what I had seen the men and boy suffer, this seemed the height of pettiness to me, a pettiness approaching idiocy. And I let him know it.

I cursed him and cursed myself for offering to spend five days as warden in this bedlam amid a frozen hell.

"What was I thinking?" I shouted at him, but asking it more of myself. "What master was I serving?"

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In my rage and self-loathing, I burst out my hut's door and attacked the captain. A fury had seized me, and I struck the man a blow that knocked him to the ice. I immediately pounced on him and ground his face into the harsh snow until there was a crescent of red mash beneath us.

I released him, and the man scrambled up and dodged the missiles of rubbish I threw at him. He ran off, and I returned inside, where I sat with the boy. I applied more compresses to his eyes and drank off the remains of a bottle.

After dark a thrashing at my door awakened me. Through the oilcloth, I could see flickering light. I knew it was not the aurora. These were the coruscations of pitch fires, the blaze of torches. I shook the boy to awaken him, but his slumber was too deep. He lay as if entranced. I covered him in blankets to keep him warm, perhaps to protect him.

Suddenly the door fell in, and two large seamen entered and grabbed me. In an instant I was outside, standing in the center of a ring of ten or fifteen men. There was no sound but the thin crackle of the torches.

After a moment I heard a voice I recognized as Bushrod's. It said, "He's the one who let us go, Captain. Me and the loon and the boy you bought."

The captain — the one I attacked, his head now bandaged — swung a broken oar he was carrying and struck Bushrod across the face. Bushrod dropped to the ground and howled. There was a rumbling and shifting in the mob. It was like the tremor that goes through a herd of horses when a grain bucket is rattled at a stable gate.

Bushrod scrambled away behind the torchlight, and I could hear his moans. It was a long moment before anyone moved or spoke. Even I, in my half-conscious, drunken state, felt the weight of how far we had descended as men. The torch flames cast a dim light, a sad, despairing mimicry of the ethereal aurora we had seen rise above us that winter. As anyone who has witnessed it knows, the aurora has the power to draw men's souls upward. But the torchlight flickering that night in The Breaking-Up Yard collapsed and squirmed dully on the snow where we men slouched and swayed.

Perhaps my realization of our pitiable state and our distance from redemption was enough to give me the jump on everyone. More likely it was terror and cowardice. Whatever the reason, I sprang first and ran for a gap in the circle. Men shouted and scrambled after me. I slipped and recovered and ran some more. I could hear shouts from everywhere. I

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dodged toward my shack, threw some pieces of junk at my pursuers, and ran toward open ice.

To anyone watching unaware of our desperation, the scene would have appeared comical. But to us in its midst, we were exercised in the extreme. I had grabbed a claw hammer in the tussle near my shelter and took some swings at my nearest chasers. I wounded one man in the cheek, and I saw the red and white of torn muscle and fat bloom on the side of his face. Someone hit me in the back of the head with a plank. I felt blood soak my collar.

My pursuers caught me in a ditch of ice. When they tackled me, I knew I was beaten, so I called for mercy. As we lay in a gasping, heaving mass, we heard shouts, and we looked back in the direction from which we had come.

My hovel was ablaze. One of my pursuers must have thrown his torch on the building during the chase. The place was consumed in flames.

The sight alarmed me so, that I flooded with new strength and burst from my captors. I ran across the ice toward the fire.

"He's in there!" I shouted. "The boy! He's in there!"

This caused confusion among the sailors. No one had seen the boy run out; they knew I was right. Men raced toward the flames, looking for a way to enter the fire and pluck the child out.

But no one could get close. The tiny shack was soon collapsing in on itself, a mass of fire and coals. And again we were men, staring dumbly at what we had wrought.

They threw me in the stocks. The captain ordered it, and the mob carried me to the hilltop, not in an angry rush, but in a grim, silent march. For three days I stayed there. A few of the sailors came up to view me and to stoke my fire. One bound my head wound. I feared they might make sport of me, but none did. They only stared briefly, then made use of the hill to search for a sail on the horizon.

And ships did come. Five American sealers and three British fur traders had been led to our encampment by our fires' smoke.

They came, but none took me. From my hill I watched my marooned companions clamber aboard boats, and I saw each ship leave through the skein of channels now open in the ice. I called and pleaded for release, but no one heard. In their excitement they had forgotten me. Other ships came, and more sailors departed.

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Perhaps all had gone. Certainly all the settlements I could see were departed. I hung in my pillory, looking out on the sprawl of wrecks and detritus on the ice. While I had coherence to my thoughts, I lamented what had happened to the child. But soon my mind began to reel and unwind from the lack of food and water and from the relentless sun beating off the ice. Once, in my delirium, I thought I saw a small figure running and stumbling about down near several of the wrecks. But when I looked again, he — or it — was gone.

The night after this vision, I beheld once more the magnificence of the northern lights. I looked up at them and had a brief moment of exaltation as I thought through my pain and hunger and despair to realize I must be near death, and how this might be the last sight of my life, and how beautiful that would be.

In the midst of this reverie, I saw the patterns of the aurora begin to change. Long flares of the cold, bluish white glow broke off from the whorl above me. They pulsed, and with each throb, swirled and coalesced into a knot of light toward the northern horizon.

This new vortex began to take on its own shape. I am not speaking now as a daydreamer in a meadow who imposes castles or dragons or corpulent opera divas onto the shapes of clouds gliding overhead in a summer sky. I am stating that I saw, as if it were presented unto me, the shape of that boy in the lights of the northern sky. It was unmistakably the child. The figure towered over me and smiled. It was an apparition of brilliance, beauty, and detail such as I know I shall never see again on earth. The child's smile had the aura of an angel's halo, a radiance befitting holiness. I hung agape in my prison. Then this boy raised a luminous hand and waved, as if signaling out to sea, beckoning someone to come this way.

He made this gesture once, then twice, and then pointed down from the ether to where I was. He looked at me for a moment — or an age; time had stopped — and then disappeared. The huge glowing peninsula of light that had extended from the main body of the aurora, this vision of the lost and fatherless cabin boy, faded from my view as quickly as a doused candle.

And I wept. The tears came as if water were being squeezed from stone. It was as if the Lord himself were pressing down on me, bringing forth my cries. I must have kept doing this in my delirium for hours, because the next thing I knew, I heard the voices of men halloing me

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from below on the ice, and it was daytime.

They were Danes. Their ship was moored in one of the leads. They scrambled up to my promontory and set me free. They had to carry me to their ship, and it must have been with some difficulty, for I kept struggling and calling for the boy.

But no child came forth, and soon we sailed away from The Breaking-Up Yard, which had become a still, desolate collection of human leavings on a melting extent of ice.

On the homeward journey, when I had recovered sufficiently, I asked the Danish skipper if he and his men had searched the settlements for other survivors. They had, he said, but there were no signs of life. He was a jolly man, and laughed down at me as I lay in my berth.

What did I care? he wanted to know. After all, it must have been the citizens of The Breaking-Up Yard who had thrown me in the stocks and abandoned me.

"And why did they put you there?" he asked.

With this question, the first gust of bitterness for all that had happened struck me. It pierced my relief and gratitude for being rescued, and, though I couldn't know it then, it was to last a lifetime. It made me reply tersely, "I had disturbed the peace."

"That is all?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and fell silent.

A day later I asked the captain why he had come to Melville Bay and The Breaking-Up Yard.

"Curiosity," he said. They had heard about it from other ships.

"Before you arrived, the night before," I pressed on, "did you see the aurora in the sky?"

"Yes," he said. And this time, it was he whose expression tightened. The beard that grew high on his cheeks seemed to bind his mouth. Still, I felt compelled to ask more.

"Was there anything unusual about that aurora?" I asked.

He looked at me, and I saw his stare metamorphose in a flash from curiosity to dread to a glare.

"No," he said.

"No?" I asked again, hoping to inspire a feeling that he was there with a brother witness.

"No," he repeated softly, as if to say the subject was closed.

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I lay spellbound by the reluctance of both of us to speak of something that hovered in the air between us.

Finally he rose from his stool beside my berth and said, "You need more rest." He left.

I was treated with kindness, but from a distance, by the captain for the remainder of the voyage. The Danes nursed me to health and transferred me to a passing American merchantman bound for Boston.

When I was about to leave the Danish ship, the captain laid his hand on my shoulder as I straddled the rail before descending into the longboat.

"I saw it," he said.

"What?" I asked, for now I was thinking only of standing on American soil in a week's time.

"In the aurora," he said. "I saw it. And it beckoned me to you."

He gestured with his hand exactly as the vision had. A swell heaved and lowered the ship, but in this moment, as we saw into each other's faces, the seas, the very globe they covered, had — for us — become still.

"Did anyone else—?" I asked, indicating the crew.

He shook his head. "To them, it was just light."

I felt the ship gently roll into a broad trough between waves, as all ships do, thousands upon thousands of times every voyage.

"When a man loses his son," the captain said, "as I did eighteen years ago now, drowned off Cape Farewell, the man sees things in the sky . . . in the waves, in the broken faces of the icebergs that pass by at twilight. It is longing. One longs to close the impossible distance. One sees things. It wasn't curiosity that brought us. It was what I saw. What I lost. It was longing. You must know."

He stepped back from the rail and let me go. A sailor called from the boat below, and I descended. A week later, when I stepped onto the wharf in Boston, I knew I'd never go to sea again.

I live now north of Hartford, a good day's ride from salt water, a day's ride I have never made. Unlike my vows to abstain from drink, which are numerous and well known in my small village, or my vows of matrimony, which liquor corrupted years ago (I live alone now, my wife having returned to her family in Massachusetts), or my untried vows to begin life anew in the Territories, my oath to stay away from the sea still stands. I have never gone back.

I have been left ashore to dwell for years on what happened that winter

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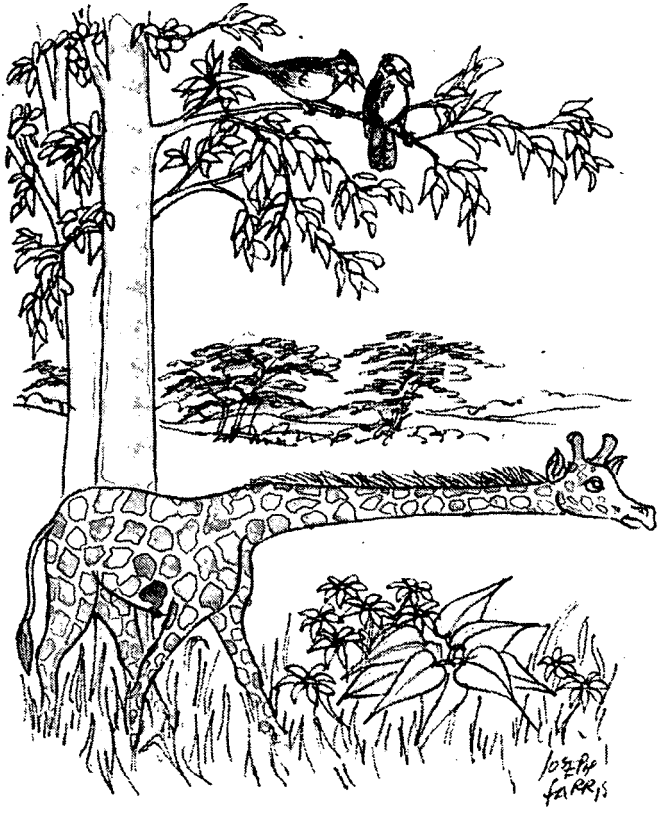
in Greenland. I am an old man now, and sometimes, amid all the other old-man emotions of dread and regret and confusion, I find myself laughing. It no doubt is a drunkard's bitter mirth, but it is laughter nonetheless.

I laugh at what I once was: a young ship's carpenter who saw what he saw in The Breaking-Up Yard, did what he did, and then, when setting foot on land at last, with all the guileless hope of a young man meaning to live beyond memory, he turned the course of his life inland and believed he could forget.



*'Poor guy suffers from acrophobia."*

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*Peg Kerr teaches at the University of Minnesota, where she is currently working on her doctorate in English. Her fiction has appeared in* Amazing, Weird Tales, *and* Pulphouse. *"Athena" extrapolates a current medical procedure into something quite surprising.*

# Athena Keramitis

**By Peg Kerr**

MICHAEL LINTNER'S OPERATION was set for six o'clock in the evening. He thought it would have been easier if they had scheduled him for morning surgery instead. Maybe then he could have slept through his hunger rather than fretting away his waking hours because they wouldn't let him eat anything. He didn't speak Spanish very well, so he couldn't even argue with the nurses.

His wife Lyn came by once, early in the morning. He would have scowled at her, but the rigidity of his facial muscles prevented all expression. "Couldn't you at least have smuggled in a taco?"

"Be patient, Mickey. You wouldn't want to fall victim to *la turista*, now, would you?"

"Even hospital food would taste good right now."

"Rash words. I'll be sure to remind you of them tomorrow when you're grumbling over the Jell-O and the ever-so-soft boiled egg." She smoothed his rumpled hair back from his forehead. "I can't stay right now, but

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I'll be there when you wake up."

"You're leaving? Why can't you be with me?"

"I've been scheduled—" Her gaze dropped to the bed railing.

He remembered, and mentally kicked himself. "Sorry, honey, I understand. I just wish I could be with you." He fumbled to take her hand. His fingers were like frozen claws, making his movements clumsy. "I — hope everything goes well."

She looked at him again and smiled. "I'll be there, darling, when you wake up from the surgery. I promise." She bent to kiss his forehead and picked up her purse from the chair beside her.

His voice stopped her at the door. "Lyn?"

She half-turned to face him, one hand on the doorjamb. He took a deep breath, but everything he wanted to say felt inadequate, absurd. Her face looked pale, he noted with a pang, and shadows showed like purple bruises under her eyes. "I just meant to say thanks," he managed finally. "For giving me this chance, I mean."

She smiled again. "It's a chance for both of us, Mickey." Silently, she mouthed I-love-you, and then she was gone.

To keep his mind off his stomach after she left, he spent the day looking out the window, his bed cranked up as high as it would go so that he could see the crowds teeming through the streets of Mexico City. Beyond the southeastern portion of the city, the snow-covered volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihautl rose high above the valley, wrapped in smog. When the sun began slanting across their slopes in the late afternoon, the nurses came back.

They wheeled him to preop, where they shaved his head and fitted his skull with the metal framework that would act as a navigational guide for the neurosurgeon. The drug they had given him made him dopey, but he twisted his neck to squint at his hands, trembling on the sheet. God, he thought, this had better work.

They started the anesthesia drip, and one of them instructed him in broken English to start counting backward. He tried, but the numbers stretched out and wrapped around themselves, and he couldn't pin them down with his shaking fingers. He had time for one last thought, a prick of anxiety about Lyn.

He needn't have worried. The abortion had gone off that morning without a hitch.

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* * *

They had met at an exhibition opening at the museum where Michael worked as the conservator. He didn't usually come to museum events, but in this case he had worked on restoring several of the pieces included in the exhibition, and so the museum director had requested his attendance. As the waiters circulated with champagne and hors d'oeuvres, Michael noticed her, standing rapt in front of one of the paintings. Two glasses of champagne later, she still hadn't moved.

He wondered later what had prompted him to introduce himself. He was lonely, of course. He'd had a relationship break up six months ago, and he still didn't socialize much. More than that, though, there was something about her, about the way she studied that painting with a serious intensity, allowing him to observe her without her being aware of it. He liked the tilt of her chin, the humorous lift of the corners of her mouth. She didn't notice as he came up behind her.

"I take it you like it?"

She looked at him, startled. "Hmm?"

"The painting. You've been staring at it for over a half an hour."

"I have?" She looked around as if surprised to find herself still in the gallery. "I suppose Jack's left already."

He tried not to let his disappointment show. "Jack?"

"Oh — Jack Malrooney, on the city council. He comes to these to show support for local arts, you know, but ducks out as fast as he thinks he can get away with it. I'm with the city planning commission."

"I'm Michael Lintner, the conservator here at the museum."

"Lyn Eastman." They shook hands.

"So are you here to show support for the local arts, too?"

"I got so interested I forgot all about schmoozing with the local intelligentsia." She laughed, and gestured with her chin toward the canvas. "He's really very good. There aren't very many modern painters who still concentrate on classical themes."

Michael studied the painting. In the dark lower left corner of the canvas, a nude male figure crouched, its face twisted in agony, a study of powerful flesh in murky browns and grays. A wild tangle of color poured from a brilliant vermilion fissure in its skull, lighting up the rest of the canvas in a startling contrast of color: cadmium yellow and green, magenta, orange, and brilliant blue shading into purple. In the center of this riot

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of hues, the ethereal figure of a white-clad woman arose, arms uplifted, presumably originating from the male figure's head.

"Athena Keramitis: Birth," read the plaque at the left side of the painting.

"I think the title refers to Ruskin," said Lyn.

"Hmm?"

"John Ruskin, from *The Queen of the Air*. Uh, the study of the relationship of the goddess to the vital forces in the material organism." She smiled, a bit guiltily. "Don't mind me; I like to show off once in a while. It was part of my senior thesis in college."

"And you're with the city planning commission?" he asked in mock bewilderment.

She laughed. "Liberal arts. You never know when it might come in handy."

The opening made it impossible for him to speak with her for very long, but he did mention the lecture on Chinese jade being held the following week. When she showed up for that, he did something that he considered very brave asking her out for coffee afterward.

THE TREMORS first showed up about a year after they were married, a flutter starting gradually in his fingers, eventually including both his hands, particularly when he was tired. The tweezers and fine-hair brushes he used for his delicate, exacting art-restoration work became more and more difficult to handle. Eventually he gave in to Lyn's badgering and made an appointment to see a doctor.

After poking and prodding a bit, the doctor ordered tests: blood count and chemistries, electrocardiogram, urinalysis, and various other indignities. Michael tried not to worry, but not worrying became more difficult when the doctor said he wanted to refer him to a Dr. Dolmane, a neurologist at the university.

"She'll give you a neurological examination," his doctor explained. "It'll take maybe thirty-five, forty minutes: testing reflexes, sensations, checking your walk and posture, administering a couple mental-function tests. She'll probably ask for a handwriting sample. And I think she'll probably also order a CAT scan."

"A CAT scan? Jesus. What are we talking about here? Stroke? Tumor?"

"Let's give her a chance to evaluate you first, Mr. Lintner."

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Lyn came with him to the consultation when the results were in. "It's Parkinson's disease," Dr. Dolmane said. "It affects about one person out of every thousand. You're younger than the average patient, maybe, but that fine handwork you do made you notice the tremors more quickly than most people would."

"Parkinson's disease?"

"Yes. You've heard of it, haven't you?"

"I — don't know; I guess so. Is it serious? What causes it?"

Dr. Dolmane sighed, which Michael privately thought was a bad sign. "We think it's caused by a degeneration of an area of the midbrain called the substantia nigra, the portion that produces the neurotransmitter dopamine. It's the lack of dopamine that is causing your movement disorders: the tremors, rigidity, and bradykinesia — that's what we call your slowness of movement."

Michael looked down at his hands. Movement disorders, right.

"You still haven't answered the other question," said Lyn. "How bad can it get?"

"That's difficult to say. I'm sorry; I don't mean to be evasive, but every patient is different."

"Will it be possible —" Michael stopped, glanced at Lyn. "I mean, we haven't really talked about children much yet, but will we be able to have a family?"

The doctor hesitated. "Well, Parkinson's isn't generally seen as being genetic, if that's what you're asking. Most of the time, we don't really know what causes it. As for treating it, well, we'll have you begin physical therapy to help work out some of that stiffness. There's a drug treatment available called levodopa, too, and I'd like to start you on that. Do you have any allergies to any particular medications?"

"Um, aspirin and some antihistamines."

"Hmm," the doctor frowned. "That may be a bit of a problem."

It was. He turned out to be a bad candidate for L-dopa; it was too hard on his digestive system. Dr. Dolmane switched him to Sinemet, hoping it would help ease the levodopa absorption. No luck: Michael kept suffering from the same nausea. They tried biperiden, trihexyphenidyl, and finally bromocriptine. He kept losing weight from the vomiting, and finally they had to stop.

The tremors got worse. He had to stop doing restoration work, and

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switched to cataloging and research. Eventually his handwriting got so bad that no one in the department could read his notes, and typing became impossible.

Getting out of bed became harder each morning. It wasn't just the disease, Michael figured out finally; it was depression. He *missed* doing restoration. How long would it take before the museum management decided he wasn't any use as a glorified research assistant, either? Everyone was sympathetic, but after all, he wasn't doing what he had been hired to do anymore.

He got into the habit of wandering around the museum after his working day was done, settling down eventually on one of the marble benches to stare at the paintings. There, in the cool of the quiet galleries, he would sit and try to concentrate on the landscapes and still lifes and portraits. Bits and pieces from art history kept coming back to him: Degas had gone blind near the end of his life; that was why he used to outline the dancers' forms with a black line. Van Gogh had struggled with madness. Rembrandt had gone bankrupt. Toulouse-Lautrec had been deformed, born with short legs. They had all grappled with obstacles and handicaps in order to do what they wanted to do. Couldn't he?

And what would happen to him if he couldn't?

Nobody was saying he couldn't be useful anymore, he told himself. After all, he had never been a jock, never been very active. It wasn't like he was paralyzed or anything. He could probably change careers, retrain himself to do something else with his life. Nevertheless, he found himself becoming angry with himself, with Lyn, with the disease. He began stuffing his hands into the pockets of an old cardigan at work to hide the shaking.

His walk deteriorated to a slow shuffle. Sometimes he felt as if he were falling over, and he would stumble along for a few steps at a half-trot to catch up with his center of gravity. Standing up straight grew more and more difficult, despite the physical therapy, and he began to suffer from constant lower-back pain. Buttoning his shirts and tying a necktie became an ordeal every morning. Eventually he gave up and had to rely on Lyn's help.

The last straw was when he started drooling.

Lyn, who was always at her best when in charge of something, began

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taking charge of his Parkinson's. She wrote to the United Parkinson Foundation in Chicago for literature and began haunting the biomedical library at the university.

"What about joining a local support group, Mickey?"

"What?"

"There's an affiliate of the Parkinson Support Groups of America in the city. They hold lectures, meetings, sponsor exercise sessions."

"I'm not interested, Lyn."

"Come on, you need to talk with someone about it."

"I fall asleep during lectures. I have to sit through enough meetings at the museum. Exercise makes my feet smell."

She flinched as if he had slapped her. "I want to help you, Mickey," she said through her teeth. "I want you to get well more than anything in the world."

He felt ashamed of himself. "I'm sorry, honey. It's just — just everything getting to me, I guess. But you're not likely to see me get well; don't you understand? I can't take the drugs, and it's only going to get worse."

"That's another thing I wanted to talk to you about. I've been talking with Dr. Dolmane —"

"I don't like you talking with my doctor behind my back," he began.

"Would you just shut up and listen? She was telling me about this program in Mexico."

"Hmm?"

"Surgery, Mickey. It's for people who can't tolerate the drugs. You'd be a good candidate; they're more likely to take patients under forty. I'm going to write them for information, O.K.?"

He told her sure, go ahead, and then he tried to make himself forget about it. There must be thousands of Parkinson's disease patients in the country, he thought. They're probably inundated with applicants; they'd never take me.

Sometimes he tended to underestimate Lyn's stubbornness. She made all the arrangements, and seven months later, they were on the plane to Mexico City.

The cab took them from the airport directly to the hospital. "I want to get you checked in first," Lyn said, "and besides, I have to get my key there, anyway." She would be staying at a nearby apartment that the

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hospital maintained for families of foreign patients.

The first few days went by in a blur of tests; Unified Parkinson Rating Scale, EMG testing, more CAT scans, more neuropsychological analysis. They videotaped him walking, sitting, and writing. Finally Michael and Lyn were ushered into the office of Dr. Gabriel Fuentes, the surgeon. He was a short, dapper man with warm brown eyes and a firm handshake. To their relief, he spoke fluent English with only a trace of an accent.

"The procedure we will be using is what we call a right frontal craniotomy," he explained. "After the skull pan is opened, I'll be making a dissection into this portion of the brain here" — he showed them a diagram — "the part we call the right lateral ventricle. That exposes the part called the caudate nucleus. A hole will be opened in that portion — very small, you understand, about three millimeters in diameter. Then we take about one gram of tissue from the substantia nigra portion of the brain of a donor fetus and graft it into that spot. It will be embedded into place with three or four miniature stainless-steel staples. The tissue will be bathed with your cerebrospinal fluid in that position, and when the graft takes, it will begin producing dopamine."

"What have your results been like so far?"

"Quite encouraging, actually." Dr. Fuentes smiled, revealing white, even teeth. "The fetal tissue is ideal for this type of procedure because it is fast-growing, yet still undifferentiated. We usually get a remarkable decrease of symptoms in six to eight weeks."

"The fetal tissue you used so far has been donated by women who had miscarriages, right?" asked Lyn.

"Yes," Dr. Fuentes replied shortly.

Lyn glanced at Michael. "I have another suggestion in this case, Doctor."

"Oh?"

"I'd like to be the donor."

There was a dead silence for about five seconds. "I don't think I — perhaps you don't understand —," began the doctor.

"I mean —" Lyn made an impatient gesture. "I'm pregnant. I'd like you to use the tissue from my fetus."

"*What?*" Michael's mouth dropped open.

Dr. Fuentes slowly began turning red. "I'm afraid — that's quite impossible, *Señora.*"

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"Why? Abortion has been legal in Mexico for five months now. I'd sign any forms you think are necessary."

"Now, just hold on here —," Michael began, but he was interrupted by an explosion from the doctor.

"Absolutely not! The hospital has never permitted such a thing."

"As I understand it, Dr. Fuentes, the fact that the law was only recently changed means that you simply haven't had to face the issue until now."

"The research committee would never allow it. As for what the ethics committee would say, my God —"

"Why not? Wouldn't it be advantageous? After all, since the tissue type would be genetically closer, you should get even better results. Isn't it worth researching that?"

"But to use the patient's own child —"

"To me, it's a piece of tissue," Lyn replied flatly. "Nothing more. It's something that only I can give him to help him."

Dr. Fuentes gave Michael a shrewd look. "I daresay your husband will not allow this."

Damn straight I won't, he was screaming silently within his mind, but he sat there frozen, unable to speak.

"It's not his decision to make!"

"You think not?" Dr. Fuentes replied coldly.

"Absolutely not. Abortion does not require the consent of the man involved. My signature is all you need."

"Oh? And do you really think I would use the tissue if he were opposed?"

"Now look here," Lyn said, really angry now. "If you do not accept this — this proposal, I'll have the fetus aborted anyway. I will. I'll either do it here, or if this hospital won't do it, I'll fly back to the States."

Dr. Fuentes's eyes widened. "Do you mean to say that you became pregnant on purpose, only for this?"

Lyn looked at Michael and back at the doctor. "Yes."

With an effort, Michael spoke. "Dr. Fuentes — if I could speak with Lyn for a moment alone, please?"

The doctor cursed in Spanish under his breath. "By all means," he added in a louder voice. "I will bring you to a conference room where you can sit and talk. Take all the time you need."

The room he showed them was small and sterile, with a battered Formica table surrounded by plastic chairs. It smelled like stale coffee, with

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an underlying tang of antiseptic floor cleaner. With a final dark look at Lyn, the doctor left, closing the door behind him. Neither of them made a move to turn on the light. Lyn went to the window and leaned against the wall, watching the rain slough slowly down the windowpanes.

For the first time, Michael really felt the gap between them, and it frightened him. He had been vaguely aware of a kind of silence growing between them ever since his diagnosis — but no, that wasn't right. Lyn had tried to talk. She had begged him to open up, but he had turned away from her, shut her out. He had concerned himself only with his own misery. How could he have let her become such a stranger that she would plan something like this without him even knowing it?

He cleared his throat. "How far along are you?"

"Eleven weeks or so."

"Lyn —" He stopped. Slowly, he pulled one of the chairs out from the table with a shaking hand and sat down. "What I don't understand," he said carefully after a pause, "is why you're so determined to do it this way."

She shifted restlessly and shook her head. "I don't know if I can explain it, Mickey. I just know that I want you to heal, and I want the healing to be from both of us. A *part* of both of us."

"It would be our first baby. I thought —" His voice broke. "I thought you wanted children."

"Oh Mickey." Coming to sit beside him, she took his hand and squeezed it. "I want children. Your children and no one else's. Except that — that I'm just not ready yet. I'm younger than you, and I haven't had as much time as you have to figure out what I want out of life. The work I'm doing is really important to me, too important to put it aside right now."

"Lyn —"

"We have years to start a family," she went on urgently. "What I want right now is you, just you." He heard the catch of her breath in the semi-darkness. "Remember when you used to drag me to the museum to see whatever you were restoring? A painting or an etching or something. You'd show it to me and explain how it had been practically destroyed because some brainless idiot had put it in a damp basement for a hundred years. I couldn't have cared less most of the time, I suppose. But you'd start telling me how you had made it beautiful again, how proud you were because people would be able to see it the way it was meant to be seen. You'd make me get just as excited about it as you were."

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He looked down at his hands with their betraying tremor. "I remember." A dribble of spit oozed out of the corner of his mouth, and he dabbed it away mechanically.

"The Parkinson's — it's like a light went out in you, Mickey." He could see a tear sliding down her face. "I guess I — I want to restore *you*. In a way. I want to do that myself, to know that I'm the one who's made you the way you used to be. If only we could have each other, both of us healthy and doing what we love to do — is that such a terrible thing for me to wish for?"

"No." He leaned toward her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. He could feel her tears dripping on his shirt, and he awkwardly pulled her hair away from the wet tracks on her cheeks and out of her eyes. "No, it isn't, Lyn. I think — I think I understand."

"And you'll talk with Dr. Fuentes?" He could hear the plea in her voice.

*Our first baby.* His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Yes."

DR. FUENTES looked very grim when Michael reported the results of their conversation. "I do not see how I can sanction this," he said.

"But she is right, isn't she? The genetic similarity could give me an even better chance?"

"I — do not know."

"But it is possible."

"It may be." The words sounded as if they were dragged from him reluctantly.

"Well, then, wouldn't your research committee be even more interested for that very reason? If both Lyn and I are willing?"

"They will probably insist, *Señor*, that both you and your wife be evaluated by a staff psychologist, to make sure that this is what you really want to do."

"We'd be willing to do that."

Dr. Fuentes sighed. "I will bring it up with the committee, then. No promises. It — goes against the grain. But I will present the case."

In the end, the vote came close. The surgery was approved, 5-4.

Crying, someone was crying. Through the cold, evaporating fog of anesthesia, he heard faint moans, like the whimpers of a woman in childbirth . . . no. A man's voice. His own voice? He felt someone. . . .

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"Mickey? Shh, darling. . . ."

Slowly, his eyes fluttered open. Lyn's face swam into focus, smiling down at him. "It's all over, Mickey. Dr. Fuentes said the operation was a success."

"Lyn." His mouth was dry, and his voice sounded like a faint croak. She raised his shoulders to give him a sip of water, and then settled him back onto the pillow. He squinted up at her, noting her pallor even through his bleariness. "You O.K.?"

"I'm fine."

"You look like hell."

Her soft laugh held a note of pain. "Wait till you see yourself in a mirror."

"Huh. I'm in no hurry." He closed his eyes again.

"That's right. Sleep now, Mickey. I'll be back in the morning."

Her cool hand slipped out of his clasp, and he felt her lips press softly against his cheek. As he drifted off, he heard the faint sound of her retreating footsteps, echoing out the door and down the linoleum-covered hall floor toward the elevators.

He started awake again once in the middle of the night. Confused, he raised himself up slightly and listened. The ward stirred around him with whispers of hospital nighttime sounds: the rustle of sheets, the thumps and sighs of respirators, the sibilant murmur of Spanish from the nurses at the night station down the hall. What had awakened him? He could hear his own heartbeat, crashing deafeningly in his ears. Slowly, he realized that the sound had been some cry from a dream, a nightmare that slipped from his memory even as he tried to focus on it. Shivering, he lowered himself and instructed his tensed muscles to unclench themselves.

Relaxing again took a long time. It was strange: somehow he had the impression of another presence — of something or someone there with him, its sound covered by the rasp of his breathing. He held his breath and strained his senses to feel, to hear, anything. Nothing: the night sounds continued around him, unimpressed. He finally fell asleep, still trying to detect it.

The weeks that followed were marked with small signs of progress, steady markers of triumph. It was as if he had been immersed in a spring of freezing water that made him shiver, but now he was able to climb out.

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The tremors slowly diminished, retreating to his lower arms, then to just his hands.

"Do you think they'll disappear altogether?" asked Lyn, watching him carefully as he ate. He could scoop the hated Jell-O onto his spoon by himself now and keep it there all the way to his mouth.

"I think so," Michael said around his mouthful of Jell-O. "I hope so."

He began to take walks up and down the hallways. As the rigidity in his limbs ebbed away, walking became easier and easier, and he no longer felt as if he were falling forward. "I'll be able to take you out dancing soon," he said to Lyn.

"Just don't fall," she answered, keeping a firm grip on his bathrobe sash.

Although the progress was gratifying, Michael found himself becoming impatient at times, even angry. He caught himself sometimes speaking peevishly to people. "You need to ease up," Lyn soothed him once when he was complaining bitterly to her about one of the nurses. "You're trying to do too much at once. It's making you overtired and irritable."

"That's not it at all," he insisted. "She always brings my meals last so that they're stone-cold. I know she hates me; to her, I'm just the stupid gringo. I'll bet she takes my food somewhere and doctors it before giving it to me."

"What?"

"I mean, she probably spits in it or something."

"Mickey!" Her eyes narrowed as she studied his flushed face. "Mickey, you — you don't mean that, do you?"

"N-no. No, I don't, Lyn." He turned away from her. "Just a joke, I guess."

Except that it wasn't.

He didn't tell her about the trouble he had sleeping. He would drop off all right when she left him at the end of each day, but something always woke him up with a start in the middle of the night. Sometimes he thought he heard a sweet voice whispering to him, fading away just at the edge of awakening. Clutching his pillow, he struggled to remember what it murmured in his dreams, but the words remained maddeningly elusive.

He began to be bothered by apprehensions during the day. Sometimes, during his daily walks up and down the halls, he would feel someone near, watching him with a curious intensity. When he turned quickly to confront whoever it was, the corridor would be empty. Or perhaps he would see only one of the other patients, struggling along behind a walker

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or sitting slumped in a wheelchair against the wall.

Nothing, it was nothing, he told himself. He tried to put it from his mind. It's just the hospital. Hospitals give me the creeps.

"We're certainly pleased with the progress you've been making."

"You're not kidding, Dr. Fuentes; so am I. Look—" Michael slowly picked up a pencil on the hospital tray in front of him, pulled a pad of paper over toward him, and painstakingly wrote his name. Beside the bed, Lyn leaned in to watch.

When Michael put the pencil down again, he simply stared at the pad for a few seconds. "You wouldn't believe how many times I've wanted — why, I may even be able to go to work again if this keeps up."

"I hope so. You know, the team thinks it's time that you took some little expeditions, maybe. Stretch the wings a bit. A day pass, yes? Do a little sight-seeing for some exercise — only, you must be careful not to overtax yourself."

Accordingly, the next day after breakfast, Michael dressed himself carefully and left the hospital with Lyn. "We'll take a cab to the apartment for a start," she said. "I have a lot of brochures that I picked up from the Tourist Office, and we can look at them and figure out where we want to go. Mickey, this is going to be so much fun!" She reached out to hug him, leaning her head momentarily on his shoulder and squeezing his arm. "It's been lonely during the nights, you know. The apartment's really a nice place; I've been dying to share it with you. We can have the cabdriver go by the Zócalo, and there's a restaurant I want to take you to that serves the most wonderful *comida corrida* luncheon."

THEY SPENT the latter half of the morning strolling through the Jardín Botánico in Chapultepec Park. Later, over a leisurely midday meal, they perused the tourist information that Lyn had picked up. "Are you sure you're not too tired to see the museum?" Lyn asked as Michael sipped his coffee.

"God, I wouldn't miss it."

"Well, O.K., but maybe we can rent a wheelchair at the ticket booth."

He sighed. "Lyn—"

"All right, all right." She held up a forestalling hand. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to fuss anymore."

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As they passed the huge stone statue of Tlaloc, the Aztec rain god standing at the entrance to the museum, he could feel her eyes narrowly watching his back. He felt a pressure building up in his head, and his fists clenched as she stopped at the desk just inside the lobby to buy tickets for the English tour. Just forget it, he counseled himself. It's an adjustment for both of us, that's all. We'll work it out. He blinked and shook his head slightly, but the feeling of pressure refused to go away.

The museum had been designed around a large patio courtyard half-shaded by a massive stone "umbrella," with spacious rooms running at two levels around three sides. The tour guide, a plump woman of about thirty with an animated voice, led them to a spot on the outskirts of the patio and gestured to those on the periphery of the group to step in closer so that they could hear. "Welcome to the Museo Nacional de Antropología." She went on to explain something about the history of the museum and its architecture; Michael barely listened. Again, he had that uneasy feeling that someone was watching him. He itched to turn and scan the room behind himself, but he knew that he would see no one.

"Please proceed with me to the *Sala Origenes.*" This was ridiculous; he should be listening to what was being said. Mechanically, he stepped forward with the others, and as they entered the next room, he tried to pay attention to the information being given about the exhibits. It was no use; something faintly niggling kept bothering him. What was it? He frowned, concentrating. The guide's voice chattered on, but he was straining to hear something else, an extraordinarily faint voice sounding like a melodious chime somewhere within his mind. He knew it for the voice of his nightmares. If only he could make out the words, he knew he would be able to remember what the dreams said to him.

"And here in the *Sala Teotihuacâna,* we havē the models of the great ceremonial center of Teotihuacán, outside Mexico City. The exhibits in this room and the next one concern the period of Mexican history known as the preclassical times, from 2000 B.C. to A.D. 300." He glanced over at Lyn, but she had totally forgotten her concern about him and was staring at the diorama in the glass display case. He wanted to go to her, to touch her hand, but a wash of fear held him back. Jesus, my head, he thought. What on earth is happening to me?

"This room, the *Sala Mexicana,* is one of the most important in the museum. In the glass case over here is a replica of the feathered headdress

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worn by Moctezuma, last emperor of the Aztecs. We have here the famous Aztec Calendar Stone, unofficial symbol of Mexico. The other carved stones in this room include the Piedra de Tizoc; Xiuhcoatl, the fire-serpent; a Tzompantli, or wall of skulls; and here we have the terrifying Coatlicue, goddess of earth and death."

He stared at the monolith, and all of the other displays in the dim room faded away from the edges of his sight, all light swallowed up by the dark volcanic ash. Coatlicue. He swayed and felt Lyn's hand on his arm. I'm going to faint, he thought with a numb, surprised clarity, but he managed to hang on as Lyn seized his elbow and led him out to a bench in the courtyard.

For a while he simply sat, his head lowered between his legs, as Lyn gently stroked his back. He finally began to hear her voice again, dim at first, and then growing louder. ". . . all right? You gave me such a scare, Mickey. I looked over, and your face looked absolutely green."

When he could manage it, he sat upright again. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm fine, really. Just a little dizziness."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said with some asperity. "I'm sorry to be missing the rest of the tour."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mickey. We probably should be getting back to the hospital."

"He bit back the urge to argue. "Well — perhaps, but not just yet. Let's just sit for a bit."

She sighed and leaned against him. "All right. For a bit." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "You were right, you know, Mickey. It is a wonderful museum. I had no idea that the Aztecs had such a remarkable culture."

"Yes." He shifted, trying to listen. The voice had fallen silent again.

"Really, all I had known about them was something about their practicing human sacrifice. How they believed it was necessary to protect the sun, the cosmos —" Her eyes suddenly turned to his head, where the new growth of hair hid the scar, and she faltered.

He didn't notice. "Human sacrifice. At least it was willing sacrifice." He laughed, a painful, grating sound.

Lyn's gaze slid away to the tops of her shoes. "Yeah, I think I remember reading somewhere about that, how they were all volunteers." Her voice

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sounded uncomfortable. "Of course, that didn't make much difference in the long run: the practice still did a lot to bring about the end of their civilization."

"Or at least,' Michael went on, "that's what she said, that she really wanted to do it." The voice was beginning again; only, this time it was becoming louder. "She says it's because she wanted me to live, because you loved me so much."

Lyn looked at him again, startled. "She? Wait a minute, I thought we were talking about the Aztecs."

"Do you think it's true, Lyn? Can she really understand? Can she forgive me?"

"What do you mean? Whom are you talking about?"

"Her! That voice! She's always there, and she's growing stronger all the time," he said hoarsely. "All the time now. She says she only wants to help me, but how do I know that? Do you think I can trust her? Do you?" He staggered to his feet, swaying.

"Mickey? What are you doing?"

"Have to — have to get back. Have to see —"

"Mickey, wait!"

He headed back to the *Sala Mexicana* in a stumbling run, and the voice surged in him, singing as he ran. It sang of love, of sacrifice, and he felt its rhythm in his blood as he pushed through the startled cluster of tourists.

He slid to a stop at the case holding Moctezuma's feathered headdress. His panting breath misted against the cool surface as he leaned against the glass. As he watched, the iridescent feathers shifted, as if stirred by a wind, and then the headdress lifted itself from the Lucite base. The feathers gleamed as if illuminated by the light of the brightest noonday sun, and then they *were* light, dazzling shafts of cadmium yellow and green, magenta, orange, blue, and purple. As the brilliance enveloped Michael, he saw the priest step forward, lifting the obsidian knife toward Michael's heart for the sacrifice — but no, it was Dr. Fuentes, and the obsidian scalpel was peeling back the layers of his skull, not his chest. In his agony he shuddered in anticipation and dread, knowing that this was the birth.

Lyn reached him just as he fell to the floor in convulsions.

Dr. Fuentes met them in the Emergency Room. Michael was screaming and thrashing about, struggling to claw at the straps securing him to the

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gurney. A nurse darted forward and sank a hypodermic into his arm as if she were trapping a lion. In just thirty seconds, Michael's screams tapered off into moans and then labored breathing. As another nurse began strapping on a blood-pressure cuff, Dr. Fuentes tilted Michael's head back to check his retinas with a penlight. "*¿Presión arterial?*"

"*Ciento treinta y cinco sobre ochenta y cinco.*"

"Dr. Fuentes, what is wrong with him?"

He didn't spare her a glance. "*Señora* Lintner, you'll have to leave now. *Comience una colution arterial.*" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "*Prepara cuarto tres.*" Another nurse nodded and left the room.

"But what is—"

"Some kind of intracranial pressure. *Ecuentre el tipo y asegüres tres unidades de sangre.* We're going to have to operate." Dr. Fuentes jerked his chin toward the orderly, who took Lyn's arm and firmly guided her out the door.

"But I want to—"

The orderly cut her off with a torrent of Spanish, pushed her through the door to the adjoining room, nodded toward the couch against the far wall, and headed back toward Emergency at a run.

She sat in the waiting room for hours. The people around her came and went. Spanish flowed over her like water, like oil, never touching her. She paced. She sat. She waited.

She was just beginning to nod off, when a hand on her shoulder made her jump. She looked up and saw Dr. Fuentes.

"*Señora,* your husband is in recovery now."

She had difficulty tearing her gaze away from the bloodstains on his surgical greens. "Will he be all right?"

The doctor sighed and sat down beside her. "The paranoia wasn't an entirely unprecedented reaction to the operation. We saw it before, with the adrenal-cortex transplant that was a forerunner to this type of surgery."

"Will it, uh, wear off?"

"The fetal cells have taken, and they have begun dividing very rapidly. Too rapidly. We've managed to stop the bleeding, but the cells have established themselves almost too well."

"You mean it's like a tumor?"

"That's a fair comparison. It has grown astoundingly large in just this

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short period of time, pressuring other portions of his brain. That's what caused the convulsions — pressure on the motor areas."

"Couldn't you just remove it?"

"We have done what we could, but the growth has reached some areas of the brain that are inoperable. We will just have to wait and see. And to hope that the rate of cell division slows down." He patted her shoulder awkwardly, and she saw how tired his eyes looked. "I am sorry."

"Can I see him?"

They said she could have only a moment. She tiptoed into the room and eased into the chair beside the bed, taking his hand. After a moment his eyes opened, and he slowly turned his head to see her.

She tried a smile that didn't look very genuine. "Mickey, you're going to be all right. The doctors will take care of everything."

"Yeah." His voice sounded faint. "I'll be fine, Lyn. Don't worry." The anesthesia made him sound as if he were about a million miles away, as if he didn't care about anything anymore.

"Mickey?" She swallowed hard. "Mickey, I'm so sorry. If I hadn't pushed you so hard, forced you into the surgery, maybe—"

"You didn't force me into anything. Don't blame yourself."

"I love you so much, Mickey. I only want us—" She stopped and squeezed his hand.

He didn't even seem to hear her. "You know what's going to happen to me?" He smiled faintly. "I'm going to have a baby."

Her tears blinding her, Lyn said nothing.

"Our baby, Lyn. I think it will be soon now. Very soon. I can't wait." His voice began trailing off. "A girl, I'm pretty sure. I've always wanted a daughter." His eyes closed as he listened in the darkness and felt within himself for the presence, the small presence growing in the smooth inner reaches of his mind, waiting patiently to be born.

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*Tom Easton, "Down on the Truck Farm" (March 1990), returns with a new and entertaining story that offers an answer to the question of what all the big game hunters will do when the big game is all extinct,*

# Micro Macho

**By Thomas A. Easton**

I SAT HUNCHED OVER my desk, staring at the dusty chair that had until a month before held the most curvaceous secretary any editor had ever had the privilege of ogling. I knew it was true. My colleagues had told me so. So had my writers, in between attempts to chat her up. My publisher and my printer had both tried to swipe her. But I had kept her. I, Manley K. Mitten, had held on to Ms. Lucinda Browne through thick and thin.

I sighed. I groaned. I glanced at *The New Yorker* on my desk. I got it for the cartoons, but I wasn't in the mood right now. My eyes unfocused. I lay my head in my hands and felt my bushy beard like wire against my palms.

In the end, things had become just too damned thin. *Big Game Monthly* had thrived as long as big-game hunting had thrived. Guns or cameras, that had never really mattered. As long as the game animals were there and people could go looking for them.

But poachers had done for the elephant, despite attempts to stop the international ivory market. We had done a piece on that. Lots of color

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pics. We'd done another one on how the demands of Arabs for dagger handles and of aging Chinese for aphrodisiacs had doomed the rhinoceros. We'd covered the illegal hide and fur trade and the demise of the alligator and crocodile, the lion, tiger, leopard, cheetah, and jaguar, mountain goat and mountain sheep, the wildebeest and a hundred other antelopes. Even peccary and boar, eagles and hawks and vultures, moose and elk and grizzly and whitetail deer — they, too, were gone. Hunting. Poaching. The destruction of essential habitat by farmers and loggers and finally acid rain. And then the ultraviolet the missing ozone let through. For a while *BGM* had actually sounded like some environmentalist rag.

We still had domestic animals and zoo animals under protective shelter. A few wild ones still survived. Coyotes, for instance; they had long since proved that they could survive anywhere, under any circumstances. And rabbits; they bred too fast to stop entirely. But they were hardly big game.

A mosquito landed on my wrist, an inch from my nose. I changed my position enough to swat it. And there were plenty of bugs. Always and forever and even in the middle of the big city a dozen stories in the air behind sealed windows. Bugs. They weren't big game, either.

My basic problem was very simple: Nothing to hunt meant no hunting. No hunting meant no hunters. No hunters meant no readers. No readers meant no *Big Game Monthly*. And that meant no job.

I had tried. Really, I had. Antipoaching articles, until the poaching stopped for lack of prey. Near-evironmentalist complaints. Nostalgia pieces: "The Biggest Bucks of 1941" and "Kilimanjaro's Giant Tusker" and "Stalking Jungle Otters." Think pieces: "Could Tarzan Have Been Real?"

But none of it worked. The readership had been shrinking for years. Revenues, too, of course, which was why Lucinda had had to go. I peered at the window, ignoring the spot of light reflected off my scalp. I hoped she was happy at the science fiction magazine down the block. Her new boss — ah, he was a lucky bastard. His readership was booming.

But not mine. It was down so far that the publisher was making slit-your-throat gestures when he passed me in the hall. Six months. That was all I had. Max.

My eyes settled on the open magazine in front of me. A discreetly tiny ad came into focus: "Let Micro Macho Outfitters, Inc., equip you for the new age of hunting."

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What "new age"? Hunting was dead, right? That's why *Big Game Monthly* was dying.

I looked at the address. It was on Eighty-sixth near Fifth. What the hell, I thought. It couldn't hurt, and it might give me a story for the mag.

When I stepped through the store's smoked-glass door, I found a single small room, empty, its walls covered with a creamy fabric streaked with light green and tan. There weren't any customers. There wasn't even a clerk. There were plenty of things, some of them familiar: folding camp-stools, pith helmets, bush jackets, insect repellent. But the familiar items were all peripheral to a long glass display case, its sliding doors sealed by prominent locks. Inside the case were several black, crackle-finished metal boxes. Each one had a control panel studded with LEDs and switches. A wire linked each one to a joystick on a base that seemed about right to fit comfortably into the palm of my hand. Another wire linked each box to a set of goggles. Beside the boxes lay skeins of what looked like hair-fine monofilament fishing line.

I scanned the shop, looking for something that would help me figure out what was going on. But there were no explanatory labels or packages anywhere. Nor was there even a single brochure, much less a stack of them for the customers. Nor a screen running a video loop, such as I had seen in many stores.

At last I noticed the door in the rear. Painted to blend into the shop's walls, it was deliberately inconspicuous. Near it was a table holding half a dozen glass boxes filled with vegetation. Each one held a different set of plants, and when I peered closely, I could see beetles and ants and other bugs going about their business. I knew terraria weren't supposed to need the ventilation holes that penetrated these glass boxes just beneath their lids, but I stopped wondering about that mystery as soon as I spotted the labels: "Tanzania," "Brahmaputra," "Patagonia," "Alaska," "Australia," "Nepal."

I was leaning over the "Patagonia" terrarium, wondering what a miniature canvas tent was doing in it, when the door opened. "Ah!" said a tall, thin man with a forehead that was busily pushing a thick mass of sandy hair uphill. "I didn't hear you come in. I was in back, working on. . . ."

I introduced myself. I didn't have to mention my job, for he immediately said, "I used to read your magazine, Mr. Mitten."

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"Used to," I said with a snort. "That's the problem. No game, no hunters, no readers. And pretty soon. . . ." I blew through my nose again. "But call me Manley. I saw your ad. And what the hell have you got here?"

He grinned at me. "Albert Honeycutt," he said. "M.D. A year ago I ran the urgent-care clinic in Benton, Maine. Not exactly the big city. Where the hunting used to be pretty good, but. . . ."

He shrugged at me. I shrugged back at him, but I didn't say anything. I could smell a story coming, and I was willing to be patient for a little while.

"Anyway," he said. "One day, half a dozen of the locals trooped into the clinic stinking of beer and hollering for me. Their good buddy Mickey was in the back of the van outside, and he needed help, bad. . . ."

Dr. Honeycutt opened the back of the van and took one look at the man inside. He was holding his beer gut in both hands, and gut, plaid shirt, hands, and the floor of the van were covered with blood. He stank. "He's been gutshot," said the doctor. He stepped aside to let two orderlies put Mickey on a stretcher and lug him into the clinic. "Who did it?"

When there was no answer, Dr. Honeycutt glared at the men. Their noses were white with sun-block cream beneath the broad brims of their anti-UV hats. "Come on, now. He didn't do it to himself, did he? You, Franklin! I know you. I delivered your latest kid just last month. Give!"

Franklin's face was tight. He shoved his knobby hands into the hip pockets of his jeans. "We were hunting, Doc." He turned his gray head toward his friends as if to say, "Right, Stan? Joe? Jim-Bob? Walt? Everett?" They were all on the far side of their forties, old enough to remember when there had been game in the Maine woods and there had been enough fish in the streams and lakes to permit fishermen to keep what they caught.

"Poaching, you mean. We don't even have a season for rabbits anymore."

"Yeah, well, we heard someone had seen a deer out back of the swamp. And we didn't wanta let anyone else get it, you know. So. . . ."

"And Mickey?"

A shrug. Several shrugs. "He wandered off, y'know? And he wasn't there when we're ready to leave. We looked for him. That's what we found."

"An accident." Nods all around. An accident.

The doctor spat on the grass and headed for the door. Mickey should

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be on a table by now, he thought, and he needed looking at immediately. When he got inside, he told one of the orderlies to call the cops. Then he wiggled his fingers into rubber gloves and bent over Mickey.

"Can you fix him up, Doc?" Mickey's six friends had followed the doctor into the clinic's emergency room and now stood in a clump by the wall.

Dr. Honeycutt felt here, poked there. He shook his head. He said, "He wouldn't be any worse off if you'd dressed him out." There was a nervous titter as someone recalled the old joke. When he added, "And one of you did it," they all looked away from him.

"Ah, hell, Doc," said Franklin. "There wasn't any deer. So we had a few beers. Shot up the cans. Blew away a couple chickadees. You know."

The door to the room swung shut behind a new arrival. "Know what?" asked Ben Witham. Ben was the town constable; the state police always took longer to get anywhere.

Dr. Honeycutt explained, adding, "And there're no powder burns on the shirt. He didn't do it to himself."

Ben said, "Shit." He looked at Franklin and his friends. He said, "Assholes. Who did it?"

No one answered.

Ben said, "I know, and you know, that Mickey was a womanizing son of a bitch. A regular rat. It's a wonder no one shot him years ago. So who did it now?"

There still wasn't any answer.

HUH," I grunted. "You still haven't given me a clue, Doc. And I don't have all day." Actually, I did. Even the slush pile was pretty thin these days. "What *is* this gear?"

Dr. Honeycutt grinned at me. "I like a story, Manley," he said. "And if I just told you I was selling hunting gear, you'd think I was pulling your leg. You'll have fewer questions, and you'll believe me better, if you let me tell it in my own way."

I gave him a skeptical look. "If you don't boil it down, you won't convince many customers."

He grinned again. "That's *not* a problem. My worst day yet, I sold three kits."

I looked at the display case. The crackle finish and the LEDs did not

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suggest that his price tags were low, though they had to beat the bill for an African safari. I controlled my impatience and said, "Did you ever find out who shot Mickey?"

Dr. Honeycutt lay one hand on the case I was staring at. "They wouldn't talk, not to me, not to Ben, not to the state police when they showed up. And the state boys couldn't find any evidence to help. It seemed a total dead end."

Turning away from me, he opened the display case and lifted a box, joystick, goggles, and skein of monofilament onto the top. I noticed that one end of the monofilament was fastened to an oblong piece of tan plastic, about the size of a firefly.

He said, "But I had been playing around with an arterioscope. That's a narrow cable containing a few optical fibers; we slide it down the inside of an artery to look at the lining, or at the interior of the heart. There are even models that let us shine a laser down one of the fibers to burn out sludge, though I didn't have one of those. We use other versions of the same gadget for looking inside your lungs and stomach and colon."

He hefted the monofilament in one hand. "The medical cables are only three or four feet long. This is ten."

Not monofilament, then. Not fishing line. Fiber optics. "What's it for?"

"I was just fooling around," said Dr. Honeycutt. "I didn't have anything better to do. Wasn't married. Not much to do except fool around, putting on a lens with a longer focal length, using it to look at various things. And then Ben Witham dropped by the house to shake his head over how closemouthed the late Mickey's friends were being. We had a highball or two, and he wished the law allowed interrogation with truth drugs, or that mind readers really existed, or that voodoo dolls really worked. Then I showed him the arterioscope." He patted the crackle-finished box. "It wasn't this elaborate then. Just an eyepiece, a light source, the cable, and the lens."

"Let me see that thing again," said Ben Witham, looking fascinated.

The two men were on their knees on the lawn behind the small Honeycutt residence. The doctor handed the constable the eyepiece. From it, the cable fell away into the grass in front of them. Deep among the grass roots, a tiny light silhouetted stems and seed heads.

"It's as clear as day," said Ben. "It looks like a forest. And Jesus, will

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you look at that beetle!" When Dr. Honeycutt took the eyepiece back, the beetle was still there, gleaming black in the light streaming from the tip of the optical fiber, multipronged mandibles scything the air, seeming the size of a small truck.

The two men worked on their drinks in silence for a few minutes after that. Then Ben said, "Mickey's buddies would love that, wouldn't they? And. . . ." He fell silent, obviously thinking. Eventually, he said, "Did I ever tell you what a good painter my niece is? She's only twelve, but. . . ."

A few days later, Ben showed up in the clinic with a small box in his hand. "Hey, Doc," he said. "Look at this."

When Dr. Honeycutt removed the box's lid, he saw a plastic doll about an inch high. It held a miniature hunting rifle, its head bent over the stock and its arm crooked as if it were ready to pull the trigger, and it was pointed to look as if it were wearing jeans and a plaid shirt. The face had been touched with paint as well. "It's Mickey," said the doctor.

"I told you my niece could paint. I whittled the gun myself."

"What do you want to do with it?"

"Can you leave yet?"

Dr. Honeycutt shrugged. "It's been a quiet day. They can call me if they need me."

In the doctor's backyard, Ben Witham squatted and carefully plucked the grass stems from a narrow, curving lane about two feet long. "Got a coat hanger?" When Dr. Honeycutt obliged, the town constable carefully undid the hanger and bent the wire into a shape to match the lane he had plucked. Then he bent the ends down and stuck them into the dirt. Finally he positioned the tiny doll near one end of the wire. Its gun was aimed toward the nearest curve.

"Where's that 'scope of yours?" The tip of the fiber-optic cable wound up fastened to the wire in such a way that it could slide freely, pulled along the wire by a piece of fishing line. "What do you think?"

"I still don't get it."

Ben was too busy binding the arterioscope's eyepiece to the head of a croquet mallet with black electrical tape. When he was satisfied, he grunted, pushed the mallet handle into the soil, and said, "Wait till tonight."

It was well after dark when a state police van pulled up in front of Dr. Honeycutt's small house. The doctor stood on his unlit porch and

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watched Ben Witham emerge from the passenger side. Someone else, presumably a state cop, was at the wheel. Other figures were visible in the back.

Ben gestured one of those figures onto the walk and led him toward the side of the house, saying, "Got something to show you. You'll like it, being a hunter and all. And it might help us figure out who shot Mickey." Dr. Honeycutt recognized Everett Bartlett, but said nothing, letting the constable run the show as he wished.

In the backyard, Ben Witham pulled a lawn chair close to the croquet mallet and its mounted arterioscope eyepiece and told Everett, "Sit down. Look through this. And just watch."

Once Everett was in position, one eye glued to the eyepiece, Ben turned on the 'scope's light and began to pull, very gently, on the piece of fishing line that moved the 'scope's other end.

"What is this?" asked Everett plaintively. "Some kinda jungle peep show? You get a better picture on the TV. And what's it got to do with Mickey?"

"It's live," said Ben. "You are *there*." And he twitched the line.

"Yeah, I'm moving, but it's jerky." A pause. "Look at that sucker! It can't be real! This a space alien movie? Got any beer?"

Dr. Honeycutt could see the line moving bit by bit through Ben's hand. By now, he thought, the end of the 'scope must be approaching the end of its improvised track, coming up to that last curve around which waited the miniaturized Mickey.

"Hah!" Everett laughed. "I get you now, Ben. He looks twice as big as life. You want to see how we jump, right?"

The constable snorted in agreement and raised his voice. "Want to put him in the house, Doc? I don't want him talking to the others till I'm done."

Dr. Honeycutt obeyed, and then he watched as, one by one, the suspects were taken to their little tour of the grass-roots jungle. One by one, they snorted or laughed or shrugged, showing no signs of guilt awakened by the sight of a giant gunman eager to avenge its murder.

Finally only Franklin was left. Both the doctor and Ben were tensely anticipatory, eager to pounce, but already beginning to feel the sighs of defeated resignation. If Ben's little deceit were to work, it would have to work now. Franklin was the only suspect left, and he seemed no uneasier than any of the others.

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Yet when the final moment of his tour arrived, he started quite satisfactorily, cried, "Jeezuss! Mickey!", and tried to jump from his seat.

Ben held him in place with a heavy hand. "Why?"

"He was screwin' Nancy." Franklin looked toward Dr. Honeycutt in the shadows of the porch. "That kid you delivered, Doc. I don't think she's even mine!" He began to cry.

Frankly, I was bewildered. I could see some connection between Dr. Honeycutt's story and the contents of his store, but it wasn't enough. I said, "But. . . ."

He grinned at me one more time. "I couldn't leave it at that," he said. "It was just a start. A few days later, I ordered some optical fiber and a small laser from Edmund Scientific." He picked up a length of the fiber beside the box on top of the display case. He pinched it between his fingers, forcing it to untwist and reveal three component strands. "See? One for seeing. One for light. And one for the laser, so you can zap whatever you see. Hunting, and the game at least *looks* big."

"But you're stuck to a track, Doc? Like a monorail?"

"Oh no." He shook his head, picked up the firefly-sized piece at the end of his fiber-optic cable, and held it out to me. I peered at it. It looked like a tiny armored car, complete with miniature wheels and a turret studded with three glass beads. "A friend helped with this," he said. "A bit of the viewing light goes to two small photovoltaic cells to power a pair of little motors." He patted the crackle-finished box. "The cells are covered with Polaroid filters, so varying the polarization can shift the current to one motor or the other for steering." He pointed at the beads on the turret. "Lenses: one for the light, one for seeing, one for shooting."

"Let me show you." Moving quickly, he fetched one of the terraria from the back of the room — I think it was the one labeled "Tanzania" — set it on the display case, fed his miniature armored car through one of the portholes in the glass, plugged in the control box, and flipped the switch that made the box's LEDs come alive. Then he handed me the goggles. I obediently strapped them on.

The view was striking. Grass stems like forest giants. Patches of moss like brushy thickets. Pebbles like boulders. An ant like a rhinoceros, only alien, unpredictable. "You could use a matchbox for your trophy room," I said.

"Some people do, Manley." He fitted the joystick into my hand, and I

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found I could turn the turret enough to see a thick, gleaming cable, the optical fiber, trailing behind the vehicle. I could also steer, accelerate, stop. A button fired the laser. Smoke curled from the ant's chitinous exoskeleton.

"Sit in your living room," I said. "And hunt around the world."

"Exactly," said Dr. Honeycutt. "Cheaper and safer. It's also the only way you'll ever go hunting with a death ray. Even the army hasn't been able to scale them up enough."

"And there's no shortage of game." I reached into my jacket's inside breast pocket for a wad of papers I always carried with me. "I'm impressed," I said, and I was. Then, as I smoothed the papers on the top of the display case, I said, "Doc — Al — you and I need to talk. . . ."

By the time I left the store, I knew my magazine was not dead, though it would obviously need a new name to fit its new direction. *Micro Game Afield*? Or just *Micro Game*?

Whatever, Dr. Albert Honeycutt had signed a contract to do a series of articles for me. And I had a copy of his customer list for my subscription department.

In fact, I had all my problems licked.

Except one.

Could I get Lucinda back?


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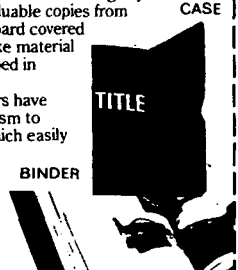


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*This fresh and polished variation on a classic fantasy theme comes to us from Canadian James Gardner, who writes that he is 35 years old, married, no children, no dog, no cat, one rabbit. He was educated as a mathematician and has written two university level textbooks. Mr. Gardner was the Grand Prize winner in the 1989 Writers of the Future contest.*

# Reaper

**By James Alan Gardner**

I COULD TELL MY Call would be a traffic fatality. It was a Friday evening in early March, the pavement was icy, and the sun was low on the horizon, at the precise spot where it would strike drivers as they came around a curve. My compass pointed to that curve, and my hourglass was almost empty.

There were a dozen of my fellow Reapers already there — we were certainly going to make network news tonight. Most of the other Reapers sprawled indolently on the snow of the embankment beside the road; one boy who looked to be fourteen years old was showing off by pretending to make angels in the snow. (Of course, his ethereal body left no mark.) He thought that making angels was very funny. I was about to instruct him on the way that sacrilegious flippancy can extend a soul's period of penance, when my eye was caught by another Reaper pacing anxiously on the highway's median.

She appeared to be in her twenties, her eyes as clear as the eyes of doves, her body glorious in a Reaper's celestial raiment. (Praise God that I

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am no longer tormented by the hormones that inflame a man's physical body.) Her gaze was fixed on the traffic speeding down from the north; from time to time, she leaned out over the lanes of cars for a better view, like a woman waiting for her lover to appear. Her scythe lay abandoned on the muddy snow behind her.

I thought to myself that she must be a newcomer to our Calling, anxious to do it correctly. I do not wish to belittle the angels who supervised us, but they were not good at talking to us mortals. They didn't give clear and specific instructions; they failed to provide the firm guidance that most of my fellow humans needed. As in so many cases where Heaven spoke ambiguously, I was forced to step in and declare the truth more plainly.

"Greetings, Sister," I said in my most comforting voice. "Is something troubling you?"

She threw a distracted glance my way, then turned back to the cars. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," I said. "You look like a woman who's worried she'll make a mistake."

She gave me another look, but this time surprised.

"There's no cause for worry, Sister," I went on. "Heaven has made our jobs very simple. The compass leads us to our Charges. The hourglass tells us when to act. The scythe cuts the cord that binds spirit to flesh. Then we may joyously greet the freed soul in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ who judges most. . . ."

I had lost her attention. She took a few impatient steps away from me and peered out over the traffic.

I was not upset. I have been ignored before. Human nature is devilishly proud and often spurns those who try to help.

"Are you worried about the violence?" I tried again. She moved away from my voice, but I followed her. Many try to run from unpleasantness, though they would be happier facing it. "I realize most new Reapers are sickened by the blood," I said. "I would guess that you come from genteel society and haven't seen the horrors of mutilation and disease. I promise you, though, you will get used to the ugliness. Everyone does. We may still find it distasteful, but not intolerably repugnant. We—"

"Shut up!" she snapped, wheeling around to face me. "I'm finding *you* intolerably repugnant. Blood is just blood. You, you're—"

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A truck horn trumpeted up the road, like Gabriel signaling all Reapers of Souls to their preordained missions. A tractor trailer had been cut off by a lane-hopping sports car; then there was a chaos of brakes, ice, sun, the trailer jackknifing, the truck heeling over on one side as the driver tried to regain the road. The front grille of the truck passed through my insubstantial body as the truck crossed the median into oncoming traffic.

I forced my eyes to stay open. It was an exercise of discipline. I didn't want to watch, so I did. The destruction had a brutal sort of grandeur, like a dance of giants: some parts dizzyingly swift, others slow but inexorable. Brakes squealed, and horns blared a musical accompaniment on top of an ongoing percussion of metal on metal.

The spectacle was so dazzling, I came close to forgetting my purpose . . . but then I saw the fourteen-year-old Reaper scrambling into the overturned tractor trailer, and I remembered my duty.

The Reaping was routine — my Charge was a mousy sort of man in his forties, impaled on the shaft of his steering wheel. The sand in my hourglass was down to the last few grains even as I arrived, but I have been a Reaper for nearly a decade and was adept at my work. Reaching into his solar plexus, I found his silver cord, pulled it out, and levered my scythe under it. As the last grain ran out, a sharp jerk severed the cord.

I sang a hymn of thanksgiving, as an example to the other Reapers. I tried to raise my voice loud enough for them to hear over the thundering din around me.

The moment the soul slid out of the body, he began apologizing. He assumed full blame for the accident (human pride — he was not cause; he was merely effect). He also assumed blame for unhappiness in his own life and the lives of those he loved, and blame for various future miseries that would result from his death. In short, he was hysterical, and his remorse wasn't worth a cinder. I left him to babble, and went in search of the young woman I'd been trying to instruct.

I found her on the embankment, sitting beside the body of a sixteen-year-old boy. Apparently, he'd been thrown out of one of the cars in the pileup below us. (Boys his age defy seat-belt laws . . . more human pride.) His head was bloody, his hair spangled with beads of safety glass glinting red in the sunset. The woman rested her hand on his arm in a tender way that I thought ill-advised. "It doesn't do to become too attached," I told her as I drew near. "It can only interfere with doing your duty. You aren't even

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watching your hourglass. How will you know when his time runs out?"

"It already did," she said. She reached around behind her back and produced the hourglass for my inspection. It was as full as a newborn baby's. "I saved him," she said, looking at the hourglass as if she could hardly believe it herself.

"I don't understand."

"I didn't take him. The time came, and I didn't do it. After a while the hourglass filled up again."

"Do you know what you've done?" I nearly shouted at her.

"I've saved him. He's already stopped bleeding." The boy stirred under her hand. "I know he's going to be all right."

"Nothing is going to be all right! You've committed a monstrous sin — don't you see that? You're supposed to do penance; you're supposed to *do as you're told.* You've defied the will of Heaven. You've spit on our Savior's mercy!"

"He reminds me of my brother," she said, stroking the boy's cheek. I turned my head away, sickened. "I've been following him for weeks," she went on. "His name's John. He hates to be called Johnny. His mother still does it to tease him. He plays hockey . . . tried different ways to comb his hair to impress girls. . . ."

"He's an ordinary teenager, nothing more," I said, grabbing her arm and pulling her smartly to her feet. "You have jeopardized your immortal soul on a whim I can't begin to understand. Don't you hold your soul precious? Don't you understand the risks? *I* had a sister. . . . Should I damn myself forever for some woman who merely *reminds* me of her?"

But it was too late to reason with her. The air around us grew suddenly warm and clear, scented with the breath of roses. I pushed the woman away from me quickly and rushed a few steps down the embankment. For a moment I glimpsed the radiant hand of an angel reaching out of nothingness to touch the woman's shoulder. Then she was gone.

At my feet the boy lifted himself groggily on one elbow. Slowly shaking his head, he took the Name of our Lord in vain.

That was the kind of boy she had chosen to save.

For weeks afterward I tried to put the incident out of my mind, but it repeatedly ambushed my thoughts. If I had one complaint with my role as a Reaper, it was my inability to affect the living world and guide it toward

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the path of righteousness. Now I had seen a way to have such an effect, but one I dared not use. Still, it fascinated me.

Standing at the bedside of a ninety-five-year-old woman, I suddenly wondered what would happen if I just walked away. Would her hourglass refill itself, her cancer vanish, her senility uncloud? Or would she remain a near-empty husk requiring a few more years of feeding and bathing? What sort of change would either alternative make in God's divine plan?

Watching a fool and his snowmobile crash through thin ice in the middle of a lake, I asked what would happen if I left him. Would he be rescued in some unforeseen way? Would he make medical headlines: Man Survives Hours of Icy Immersion. Would his doctors believe they could work marvels, when in fact it was *my* doing?

As I kept vigil with a family around the crib of a fevered infant, I thought of how easy it would be to answer their prayers, to give them their miracle. I imagined their jubilation; their relief, their effusive gratitude. With scarcely an effort, I could change their lives profoundly. I could grant them joy.

Oh, it was hard to cut that tiny cord.

IN LATE June, I was relieved to gain a respite from the torment that lured me toward disobedience. I arrived on a Call in a quiet, tree-shaded neighborhood, only to find that my hourglass still gave my Charge abundant time to live. Three weeks, perhaps? A month? It was possible. Heaven sometimes arranged such interludes as vacations from the stresses of Reaping. Or perhaps it was simply a reward for me, recognizing my faithful ministry in death as in life. In the meantime, I would not be forced to make another choice of death over life. For a while I had no tempting decisions to make.

My Charge was one Louis Gerard, a man who lived with his sister Anne in a grand house more than a century old. I already knew Louis by reputation: he was a celebrated pornographer whose photos of naked women sold as High Art because he used black-and-white film, and cropped their heads from the pictures. Sometimes he used Anne as his model — she was unflamboyantly lovely and worshiped Louis as a genius. More often he would bring home sleek young bundles of ambition who were only too eager to flaunt their flesh if it would look good on their résumés.

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I say I knew Louis Gerard by reputation, but in a few days, I knew him by his very stench. I sat in on his photo sessions and watched him exhort his women to caper for the camera. The foolish ones let him have his way with them afterward; the more astute did the same, but extracted letters of recommendation first. I watched his insatiable animal rutting and was appalled to the core of my soul.

I watched Anne, too: Anne cooking, Anne cleaning, Anne listening to the giggles coming from the studio and keeping her face blank. She developed all of her brother's photos, making print after painstaking print until she was satisfied with the result. For hours I watched her working under the red developing light, its glow softening the intensity of concentration on her face.

She worked hardest on her brother's lurid photographs, but most happily on her own. Her subjects were simple: melancholy landscapes, rusted machinery, sometimes gravestones. She never showed them to Louis — he would certainly have mocked her for wasting film on such sterile material. She showed them to me, though, even if she never knew it; and I saw more worth in one of them than in her brother's entire portfolio.

I often contemplated the gift I would be giving Anne when I Reaped Louis. She would inherit his wealth and build a life of her own. I fancied her as a cherished protégé whom I would launch on a photography career more wholesome than her brother's. There was justice in that; and it led me to see justice in all acts of the Almighty. Could I interfere with that justice by refusing my duty? No. I would Reap who must be Reaped, without questioning. That was the way of the righteous man. That was the path of faith.

Thus I reflected to myself as Anne quietly read photography magazines and I watched her lovely face. But I had forgotten that it is a law of Heaven that every faith must be put to the test.

One sunny morning, as I sat on the patio and Anne pulled up weeds from the garden at my feet, a Reaper walked nonchalantly through the back hedge. It was the snow-angel boy from the highway, and he gave me an impudent wave as he sauntered up. "Hey, Reap! How's the scythe hanging?"

"Do you have some business here?" I asked.

"Give me a sec to check my bearings," he said. With a great show of

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rummaging in the pockets of his raiment, he located his compass and flicked the case open. "And our next contestant is . . . the little lady crawling around here in the dirt! Let's have a big hand for her from the celestial audience. Yay!"

He applauded derisively under Anne's nose. She continued to pull up weeds calmly.

Inwardly, I shuddered.

The boy called himself Hooch, and he would not go away. I demanded to check his instruments, of course, but he was telling the truth. From all angles, his compass pointed directly at Anne. The hourglass for her seemed to have precisely the same level as the one for her brother.

"Mutual suicidal pact?" Hooch suggested. I tried to slap him, but he skipped away, laughing.

The serenity of my past few weeks shattered into a nightmare. Hooch was everywhere. If I chose to watch Louis and his obscene photo sessions, Hooch was there, shouting, "Grind that pelvis, woman! Make it wet!" If I slipped into Anne's bedroom to savor her quiet breathing as she slept, Hooch would barge through the wall and shout, "Hot damn, she sleeps in the raw!" He lewdly intruded into her most private moments; he mocked her face, her voice, her clothes, her walk; and when he saw her photographs, he burst into laughter. To his crass intellect, they were "stupid, ugly, and boring."

In my heart, I cried, Where is justice? Why was Hooch not burning in Hell? Why was he, of all the Reapers, called to Reap Anne? And why did Anne have to die now, when the death of her brother would free her for a new and better life?

Then, in the depth of my despair, the answer came to me. Justice does not merely happen. Justice is made.

The morning came when my hourglass showed Louis had less than a day to live. He was not making the best of his brief time — he sat at the breakfast table, holding his head in his hands and staring blankly at his coffee mug. His eyes were bloodshot, his face flushed and unshaven; if his woman from the night before could see him now, she would have laughed and shouted to pain him.

Anne was at the stove, making french toast. I had watched similar

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scenes before, and knew Louis would refuse to eat what she served; nevertheless, she always made the effort.

Hooch sat on the edge of the stove and watched Anne work, her hand occasionally passing through his body. "She's burning this toast, you know," he told me. "She's standing right here, she's watching it all the time, and she's letting it burn."

"Hooch," I said, "let's trade."

"Trade what?"

"People. Just for fun. You Reap Louis. I'll Reap Anne."

"You have the most colossal hard-on for this broad, don't you?"

"I just think it would be interesting," I said, pleased that I was keeping my anger out of my voice. "Doesn't it bother you that we Reapers have to toe the line all the time? We have to Reap *whom* we're told *when* we're told. That certainly annoys *me*."

"Don't try to con me," he laughed. "You've got the salami blues for Little Arfing Annie, and you want to be there to sweep her into your big, strong arms when she croaks. That's cool; I don't mind. She's yours."

I had my mouth open to protest, but I closed it quickly. Let him believe what he wanted; I knew the truth.

THE DAY continued badly for Louis. His model for the afternoon shooting session had too many ideas of her own. The two of them quarreled about poses, lighting, and the use of props. He finally threw the woman out of the studio, then spent an hour venting his anger on Anne: Anne couldn't cook, he said; Anne had botched the development of his prints from the previous session; Anne should go out and get a real life instead of sponging off him. Of course, she made no effort to argue — she let him rage for a time, then left him alone.

Without a target to strike at, Louis struck at himself — he began to drink. Hooch egged him on. "Come on, Louis, belt back that gin. Be a man; make it a double. Yeah, a beer chaser; go for it!" As Hooch cheered, he stood with his scythe pressed to his cheek, his fingers avidly fondling the handle.

Near midnight, Louis got the urge to work in the darkroom. "I'll show that bitch how to make a real photograph," he muttered. I looked at the sand in the hourglass; it had almost run out.

Inside the darkroom he fumbled with the chemicals and spilled them

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several times. His hands were shaking and clumsy. When he lit a cigarette to calm his nerves, Hooch and I exchanged smiles.

"Gonna have a hot time in the old town tonight," said Hooch.

"I'll see to the lady," I told him, and started up to her bedroom.

The explosion was less violent than I expected — we have all grown too accustomed to Hollywood's excess. From Anne's bedroom the noise was barely audible: an airy whump that didn't disturb her sleep. When I stuck my head out the door, however, I could see flames racing down the hall like unruly children, tearing through the aged building with hot glee. It was easy to see that brother and sister might well have died simultaneously.

I went back to Anne and sat on the edge of her bed. As the wood of the doorframe began to smolder, I fondly stroked her hair. "Behold, I am with you," I told her. "While I am here, you shall not perish but have eternal life."

Before the end the roaring of the fire awoke her. She reacted unwisely: stood up, tried to run to the door; The smoke filled her lungs almost immediately and doubled her over with a wrenching spasm of coughing. She felt very dear to me then: so human and vulnerable, with the desperation of a lost child. When she succumbed to the fumes and crumpled to the ground, she looked as innocent as a baby waiting for its baptism.

The hourglass emptied. I did not Reap her.

Her body burned with fire, yet she was not consumed.

In the course of time, the fire department arrived. Looking at her, they could not understand how she still lived. They sped her away in an ambulance.

Soon after, Louis burst into the room with Hooch on his heels. When the boy caught sight of me, he began to sing, "Fire's burning, fire's burning; draw nearer, draw nearer. . . ."

Louis grabbed my elbow and shouted over the crackling and hissing, "Where's my sister?"

"She's been taken to the hospital."

"Thank God," he said. "Thank God."

I didn't correct him.

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Suddenly Louis howled and began dragging me toward the door. "My negatives! We have to save them!"

"He still doesn't believe he's dead," Hooch said, prancing in the flames. I caught sight of the hourglass bouncing where it was tethered on his belt. Anne's hourglass. It was full. I felt a surge of triumph.

Hooch noticed the direction of my gaze and looked at his hourglass in surprise. "That's weird, isn't it? Hey, what did you do with the bimbo's soul?"

"I didn't Reap her."

He gave a low whistle and backed a few steps away from me. "You're in trouble, man."

"I'm not in trouble. She was your Charge."

"Help me get the damned negatives!" Louis shouted, but neither Hooch nor I paid attention. Reapers are Reapers; Louis was merely another dead man.

With narrowed eyes, Hooch raised his scythe high, holding it as a weapon. He came toward me slowly. "You suck, man. You really suck."

I laughed at his monumental arrogance.

Whether he would have struck me, whether it would have hurt, I do not know. I could feel sudden warmth in the air, smell the breath of roses. The glorious hand of an angel materialized between us, and Hooch lowered his scythe slowly.

"Good-bye, Hooch," I said. "Enjoy the wailing and gnashing of teeth."

But the hand reached out for me.

In a place of darkness, I asked, "Am I in Hell?"

A voice said, "Should you be?"

After a while I said, "I did it for Anne."

The voice asked, "Did you?"

I said, "I understand it now. You make people Reapers to test them. We're *supposed* to care for a Charge so much that we risk our own souls for their lives."

The voice asked, "Did you risk your own soul?"

I didn't answer.

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*Ray Aldridge, "We Were Butterflies" (August 1990), here returns to the exotic world of Dilvermoon and a part of it known as the Big Dimple, a dangerous wilderness filled with magnificent beasts . . .*

# The Beastbreaker

**By Ray Aldridge**

DILVERMOON IS A silver apple, big as a world. Ten thousand competing cultures fill her, packed between her steel rind and her hollow heart. You can, if it's your luck to be wealthy, rent a ship and follow the sunset around her equator. Fly low! You'll see signs of the vast trade Dilvermoon supports: innumerable star freighters, huge landing bays set into the armored hull, monstrous flatscreens advertising every conceivable product and service. Fly far enough, and you'll eventually pass over a black pit a hundred kilometers deep and six hundred across, the scar of some long-forgotten disaster.

"You've found the Big Dimple, a ruinous wilderness full of mutated beasts, criminals, savage tribes, and a few madmen.

"There are no tourist facilities."

— from *The Adventurous Traveler's Guide to the Manichaean Region.*

* * *

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The Glimmerchild rode the Midnight Beast through the dark ruins, and the big, beautiful lizard covered ten meters with each lazy bound. Crimson glowlight dripped richly over the Midnight Beast's black hide, clustering thick and bright along her spine, spilling down her withers in sinuous lines, twinkling on the Glimmerchild's crystal scales. The Glimmerchild took pride in the loveliness the two of them made. *What a fine thing it must be, to see us pass in the starshine,* he thought. *A pity there's no one to admire us.*

The trend of his thoughts annoyed him. *What if we're alone! I have the Midnight Beast; she has me.* He clamped his knees tighter to her warm barrel, and gave himself to the pleasure of movement.

Hours later, far down on the lower slopes, the Glimmerchild sensed an intelligent mind. He liked to touch other intellects, even if he could never be with them, so he reached out.

. . . madness boiled. Faces leered, distorted with a thousand unwholesome emotions. Eyes glittered; mouths sneered; brows wriggled like snakes. A thousand aimless noises rattled and wheezed; a thousand thin voices whispered evil instructions; a thousand itches and pains crawled an ancient body.

All this was background to a burning point of alertness, a watchfulness so intense as to be disorienting. . . .

The Glimmerchild jerked away. He tugged at the Midnight Beast's horn, and she glided to a stop in a small clearing. The Glimmerchild glanced warily about; such potent madness demanded caution.

Reluctantly, he extended his mind. Nothing. The watcher had appeared, a bubble of lunatic foulness, then dissipated. Perhaps the Glimmerchild had touched a dying artificial-intelligence node. Such things existed, buried beneath the ruins, but still capable of an occasional pulse of thought. *No wonder it's mad,* he thought. *Entombed in black decay, never changing, alone forever.*

The Glimmerchild slipped from the Midnight Beast's back. To one side the ruins were overgrown with a dense stand of bonecane, glowing a faint, tarnished green. On the other the wiry stems of a dead stiletto vine covered a twisted doorframe. At the far end of the clearing was a small pond bordered by rushes.

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The Midnight Beast stepped through the rubble to the water's edge. She posed there for a moment, lit by the bonecane's pale light. The Glimmerchild admired her long, powerful hind legs; her dainty forelegs; the smooth, sinuous arc of her neck; her lovely, cruel head.

He saw a flash, heard a concussive thump, and a stickyshock net knocked her rolling. She screamed, struggled, forelegs tearing uselessly at the net, until it locked tight around her. Her glowlight faded, and her eyes dimmed.

The Glimmerchild started forward, horrified, but an instant later a figure leaped from the rushes. It shrieked something. It did an antic little dance beside the Midnight Beast, a man in battered servoarmor, camouflaged with splotches of gray, ocher, greenish black — colors to match the ruins. Madness shrieked forth, making the Glimmerchild's head swim. He turned to run, and the madman saw him.

The madman's hand swooped to his belt rack, drew forth a netshell, chambered it with appalling speed, before the Glimmerchild had quite reached the edge of the clearing. "Aha!" the madman shouted, aiming. Just as he fired, the Glimmerchild dodged behind the doorframe, so that the net captured only the dead stiletto vine.

The Glimmerchild ran into the concealing darkness.

"Come back here; come back, pretty little thing," the madman roared, in a powerful, disappointed voice.

Ortolan Veek *was* a mad old man.

His madness spanned a remarkable range of obsessions and delusions. He cultivated his madness, fed it well, kept it free of the weeds of rationality. It had flowered into a great and repulsive edifice.

He wooed his madness as passionately as an artist his Muse.

Occasionally it occurred to him that if he stopped working so hard at it, he might no longer be so mad. Such thoughts he put away immediately.

Tonight he hunted from one of his favorite lurks, a clump of rushes beside a small pond. Veek was motionless, poised, the net gun held ready. Through the stems he could see the starlit shimmer of the water.

A variety of beasts came to drink there, drawn by the pond's relative purity. They were wary, but Veek was the cleverest creature in the ruins. He giggled, suppressed the sound instantly. His madness battered at him — it was trying to escape, to fly wailing from his mouth out into the night.

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He forced it back inside. *No, no, not now,* he thought. *Wait awhile, just a little while. First catch a beast, first catch a beast.* Teeth clenched, Veek rocked back and forth, a motion barely perceptible. He forced his madness to silence, and narrowed his mind to a needlepoint of watchfulness.

The beast stalked into view, magnificent, a great lizard moving on two legs, teeth like white knives, black as the deepest hole in the Big Dimple. A serrated horn on its forehead curved back in a graceful sweep. Fire covered the rex, as though her hide were a transparent crystal over lava-filled depths. *A black opal of a beast,* Veek thought, just before he fired the net.

The beast dropped screaming, but its struggles quickly ceased. Veek bounded forth to claim it, laughing. "Mine!" he shouted. "You're mine! Now your life begins."

A furtive movement caught his eye. Another beast! He reloaded, fired. The creature dodged nimbly away, disappeared into the night.

He hopped from foot to foot, shouting curses after it. "You'll be sorry!" he shrieked. Should he pursue? He peered into the darkness. Perhaps not — the night favored the beast. Nor was Veek young, though he was still strong. Besides, he could not leave the black rex helpless; who knew what scavengers might want to gnaw at its pretty hide while he was off chasing the other one? But more to the point. . . .

Veek looked up, and his madness swept over him. Ah, the constellations told the story: the Sapphire Sycophant lay low over the rim of the Big Dimple, topped by the Broken Helix; ominous, ominous. He listened. From far away came the hunting whistles of a stinkweasel pack. Omens, evil omens — all wrong for a jolly chase amid the ruins. His excitement ebbed, leaving him weary. *I'm too extravagant,* he thought. *My emotions run in eroded channels, all muddy.*

Veek lost the thought in the next instant. He stooped over his prize, examined the net's monitor node. Ah, good! The beast's heart pumped strongly; its lungs pulsed regularly. All was well. Occasionally a beast died in the net, from some mutant incompatibility with the stickyshock fiber. On such occasions, Veek was inconsolable; he would weep for hours over the corpse.

From behind the bonecane thicket, he summoned a floater equipped with a swiveling crane and winch. By the time he had the black rex secured on the floater's cargo platform, he had almost forgotten about the other beast.

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But when he turned to go, its image bloomed in his memory: a small ape, standing on two legs, covered with mirrored scales. It gleamed with reflected starlight, a soft glory.

Veek sighed regretfully, then forgot all about it.

HIDDEN BY the night, the Glimmerchild watched. His first impulse had been to run away as fast as his feet would carry him, but in the end he found himself unable to abandon the Midnight Beast. The practical consideration was this: he was small and weak, and would be vulnerable to the Big Dimple's many dangers until he found and trained another big predator.

The real consideration was this: he loved the Midnight Beast.

He watched the madman load her on a floater. At least the madman was not planning to make an immediate meal of her. She seemed to be breathing well, and his spirits rose.

When the madman drove away, the Glimmerchild ran behind, his heart pounding.

The floater soon outdistanced him, but the Glimmerchild kept on, touching the small minds of the ruins. He passed a frightened mouse, a belligerent ripstoat, a wary chumog, others; all had noticed the floater's alien passage.

Half an hour passed, and now the Glimmerchild reached the very bottom of the Big Dimple. Here the destruction was less complete. Girders rose almost intact above the sparse vegetation, looking like a skewed wireframe map of the burned-away corridors. Occasionally the bulk of a larger structure loomed above the rubble, the remnant of a corridor nexus, built of more enduring metal. The thought-trace led straight toward the largest of these, a mound topped by a struggling copse of spur pine.

The Glimmerchild sensed a vast concentration of beasts in the nexus. He identified the mind-signatures of a humpweasel, a bogtiger, a white rex, a stonesnark, a long-tailed colreave; many others familiar and strange. All seemed quiescent — not quite asleep, not quite awake. From dreamless minds came threads of uncharacteristic emotion — cold hatred; weary fear; bitter, frustrated rage. Nowhere could he find a trace of the cheerful ferocity he would expect from the big carnivores.

The Glimmerchild withdrew, shaken. What did the madman plan for

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the Midnight Beast? He searched, found her. She was alive and slowly returning to consciousness, though puzzled apprehensions clouded her mind.

He approached the big nexus with exaggerated caution, taking advantage of every bit of cover he could find. He felt vulnerable without the Midnight Beast's protection, and very small, as though he were still the most insignificant member of his tribe.

His mother had died soon after weaning him, and none of the men would acknowledge him. His scaly skin was considered strange, even by the gnarly standards of the tribe. His muteness denied him allies, but saved him from revealing his talent before he was old enough to understand how dangerous that would have been. Such talents were rogued from the tribe's gene pool far more mercilessly than mere physical deviations.

Other children set ambushes for him; he avoided them. In fights, he was hard to defeat, despite his small stature. When onerous tasks were given out, the Glimmerchild was absent an uncanny percentage of the time. All these things caused the other children to resent him, but fortunately, no one could put a precise name to the thing that was wrong with the Glimmerchild.

He had one friend, Mitsube, the old woman who guarded the tribe's teaching machine. The teaching machine was their link with the civilizations that filled Dilvermoon's steel rind. Without it the tribe would devolve. Their tech would fail, and no one would know how to make repairs. They would forget how to tap the econets, and so they would be cheated when the traders came among them. The tribe's children would become savages.

As the keeper of this essential device, Mitsube was an important woman, able to protect the Glimmerchild. She fed him, allowed him to live in her comfortable burrow. She showed her affection by permitting him more than his fair share of time on the machine. She sometimes called him beautiful.

On the day Mitsube died, the Glimmerchild lay in the machine's embrace, dreaming of Lost Earth. When the timer released him from reverie, he found her lying in the middle of her orange tarnwool rug. A mahogany stain spread beneath her body.

Her skin was cold when he touched her, and he ran from the burrow,

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making ugly croaks of fear and sorrow. He might have been put to death for her murder. But the knife had been thrust through her with a grown man's strength.

In council that night, the tribe's chairman, a man named Wu, rose to his feet. "Who knows of this matter?" Wu asked, but no one answered.

The Glimmerchild watched Loeren, a tall, heavy-shouldered man who might have been handsome but for a habitual look of petulant stupidity. Loeren's wife, Nanda, had often expressed an ambition to assume the stewardship of the teaching machine upon Mitsube's death. Something dark moved behind Loeren's eyes.

Loeren's mind opened before the Glimmerchild's probe, revealing a shallow wasteland where wooden people slowly postured. Here was Loeren, sitting before the door of Mitsube's burrow, draped in a fine stonemole cape. Here was Nanda, collecting rich fees from important people, fees that she would give in gratitude to Loeren. *Gratitude!* The Glimmerchild swam deeper, and found a memory. Loeren, speaking angrily to Mitsube. Mitsube, laughing and pointing to the door. The knife, tearing into Mitsube's frail body.

Wu spoke again. "Must I put the matter away? I ask for the last time: Who knows of this matter?"

The Glimmerchild pointed at Loeren, made the croak that was his only sound. Loeren shrank back momentarily. The Glimmerchild pushed through the crowd, finger still aimed. The people murmured.

Loeren paled, but he fixed a disdainful expression upon his face. "You lie, geek. You could not see me; you slept in the machine."

Wu's face turned to stone, and the tribe grew still. It took Loeren a moment to realize that he had betrayed himself. Then he tried to flee, but the provosts caught him.

The tribe crucified Loeren on a rusting girder. Long before the murderer was dead, the Glimmerchild had run away, pursued by a stone-throwing crowd. He took with him nothing but a loincloth, which soon rotted.

He had come close to death a hundred times. Hiding in crevices, drinking foul water, feeding from carcasses too ripe for the larger scavengers....

But three months after the tribe had banished him, he had begun to adapt to his solitary existence. He had a bonecane spear, tipped with a jagged bit of alloy. He learned to use it. He had shelter, a trickle of safe water. He was without any sort of companionship, but that was not entirely bad.

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One day the Glimmerchild hid beside a game trail, clutching his spear, waiting for manageable prey to come along.

First he heard the thud of big, dangerous feet, and he shrank down, terrified. But the gray rex that came down the trail was mortally wounded; something had bitten several cubic meters of meat from her back, and torn away one of her forelegs. She moved with a hitch and a stagger, slowly and painfully.

She fell in front of him. Her breathing grew labored, and after a while she stopped trying to get up. The Glimmerchild waited until he was reasonably certain that whatever had hurt her was not following, then he crept out and thrust his spear through her great golden eye into her brain.

When he split open her paunch, three near-term spratlings fell out kicking. Two were gray, and one was black. The Glimmerchild took the mother's liver and heart, and trussed up the spratlings to carry along. They would live for a time, a convenient supply of fresh meat.

Back at the bit of broken-down corridor he called home, he ate the gray spratlings first, and fed the leftovers to their black sister. He watched her clean predator's mind form, and he was intrigued. Her beauty emerged, and he was not immune to beauty. For a while the hunting was good, and so he kept her in reserve. One day he realized that she had become a companion. She learned to help him hunt, so that he no longer needed his spear. By the time she could carry him through the ruins on her glorious back, she was his beloved.

The Glimmerchild hid at the edge of the cleared area surrounding the madman's nexus, behind a broken meltstone column.

In the Big Dimple, unfortified dwellings soon were sacked, and the inhabitants eaten or sold to specialty slavers. So the Glimmerchild looked for defenses. The madman was tech-rich, judging by the armor and the floater; did he also possess mech guard units? Perimeter sensors? Sniffers? Autogun emplacements: Snuff fields? The possibilities were many and intimidating.

The Glimmerchild slumped down behind the column. The Midnight Beast was only an animal; perhaps she was already beyond assistance. True, she was magnificent, and he loved her. Still, he had only one life, and the Big Dimple was full of magnificent beasts. And if he had to tame another, the process would be swifter this time.

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Dawn found the Glimmerchild still wavering. He had almost decided to be sensible, to run away, when he sensed a large group of humans approaching.

One was potent, a large, energetic mind, cold and controlled, throwing off a black radiance. The other minds slept; like the animals in the nexus, they were still, bitter, defeated.

The Glimmerchild's curiosity was aroused. He slid a little deeper into his hiding place.

When the red sun lifted above the rim of the Big Dimple, a train of six armored gondola cars rolled down into view, pulled by a landwalker with a dozen short, powerful legs. Lemon polka dots, cerulean chevrons, sea-green fleur-de-lis covered the landwalker's chassis. Florid script, woven into the pattern, proclaimed the Trader's name: Margolian. A dorsal weapons blister bristled with deadly mechanisms: a big graser, a brace of smartmortars, a battery of high-cycle splinter guns, a flame ring.

The train stopped beside the Glimmerchild's hiding place. The large mind concentrated, narrowed its focus. A series of images flickered past, so fast that the Glimmerchild could barely sense them: a vat boiling with flesh, the sharp odor of ozone, an old hand holding a flask of pale liqueur — finally an ancient face, sly, mad, gleeful. The large mind clenched, grew quiet.

A bullhorn unfolded from a niche in the landwalker's side. "Ortolan!" a deep voice shouted. "Wake up in there! It is I, Hovhannes. Let me in, old friend."

A dozen sensor masts popped from the nexus. The Glimmerchild cringed back. Evidently the madman was vigilant. The mechanisms on the mast whirred and clattered; finally another voice boomed out, which the Glimmerchild recognized. "Hovhannes? Is that you? How do I know it's you?"

A sharp twinge of annoyance came from the large mind. "Of course it is I. Who else, Ortolan?"

"I got lots of enemies — as you ought to know if you're really Hovhannes." A mad titter came from the nexus.

The Glimmerchild read sour resignation. "I will show myself. Please, old friend, hold your fire."

The bow of the landwalker split open, slid back. An armorglass pod rose from the opening. Inside, lying on a gel couch, was a monumentally

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fat man, dark-skinned, bald, and naked. A glittering cluster of medical limpets clung to his vast chest. His features seemed tiny and ill-formed, except for his mouth, which was large and full of strong white teeth.

The pod sank; the armor closed protectively around the Trader.

"Hovhannes! Who else could be so ugly? Come on in!"

From the Trader came cold loathing, an emotion so intense that the Glimmerchild felt his stomach twist.

The train moved toward the nexus. When it paused to allow the heavy doors to open, the last gondola stopped right beside the Glimmerchild's hiding place. The Glimmerchild squirmed from his crevice and looked at the dark opening into which the Midnight Beast had disappeared.

A strong current tugged his heart toward the madman's lair. He shrugged, leaped onto the back of the gondola. He hung from the coupling, motionless, and was carried inside.

UNUSUAL EXCITEMENT gripped Veek; first the beautiful new beast, and now a visit from Hovhannes Margolian. He deactivated the snuff fields that surrounded his fortress, set the autoweaponry to Hold. When the train was close enough, he opened the blast doors. He watched half a dozen screens as the train slipped quickly inside. When the last carrier passed the threshold, Veek caught a glimpse of something out of place, a lively flicker of light at the back of the carrier, where only weathered alloy should be.

His carefully nurtured paranoia ignited. "Hah!" he shouted. "Trick me, would you?" He cycled the blast doors shut, so that the train was trapped in his security lock.

Hovhannes's amplified voice thundered in the tight confines of the lock. "What's wrong, Ortolan? Why would I trick you?"

Hovhannes was trying to make his voice soothing, but Veek saw the protective covers retract from the Trader's weapons. 'Now we'll see! Oh yes!" He stabbed at a red button on his security console. Anesthetic gas flooded the lock, a thick lavender fog. Something dropped from the last gondola.

The Trader's sensors swiveled about, searching for the source of Veek's alarm. One lifted away from the landwalker and flew back along the train, moving in a looping, evasive pattern. "That's right," Veek shouted. "Make it look good."

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The sensor swooped down on the thing that had fallen from the gondola. Its rotors blew away the fog, and Veek saw that it was the pretty little ape. It must have followed the black rex, he thought. Sentimental tears blurred his vision.

"I'll burn it," the Trader said. "It's nothing of mine."

"No!" Veek shouted. "I want it!"

"As you wish, Ortolan. Shall I have my mech bring it inside?"

All Veek's instincts shouted against allowing one of the Trader's devices within the nexus, even though Hovhannes was a friend, proven so over the centuries. "No. No. I'll attend to it later. Let it lie for now, and you come in alone."

Veek scanned the pod for hidden weapons, found none. Metal filled the Trader, as always. To keep his vast bulk alive, Hovhannes needed three auxiliary hearts pounding away in his chest. His bones were braced with alloy to keep him from collapsing into a puddle of crushed meat. Perhaps the Trader hid a bomb in his belly. Veek quelled his paranoia. If he never removed his armor, how could the Trader hurt him, even with a bomb? He let Hovhannes inside.

The Glimmerchild woke in a cage. His head pounded; his mouth tasted vile; his eyes seemed full of sharp grit. He rolled over on the steel floor, got to his hands and knees.

When he raised his head, he saw, through the bars, the Midnight Beast. She pressed against the bars of a larger cage, across an aisle. A single glowbulb, high overhead, lit her dimly.

He reached out, touched her with the fingers of his mind. Sad anger filled him. The Midnight Beast had never been handled so roughly, had never been made to feel helpless. Her small, strong mind was dull with bewilderment.

The Glimmerchild soothed her as well as he could, hid his own helplessness. *Don't be afraid,* he thought. *I'll think of something. Don't give up.*

He almost wept; he wished he could curse. But all he could do was wait.

After a bit he looked around. He was in a very large space. The dimness obscured dozens of cages and hundreds of stasis chambers, stacked on concentric ledges that marched upward to the pitted metal of the roof.

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Nearby, a few animals stirred, but many more slept dreamless in the stasis chambers. The air was warm, rich with competing stenches: animals, rust, mildew, and the ozone-and-plastic reek of high-level tech.

Metal doors crashed open, and lights flared. The Glimmerchild squinted through his fingers. Veek swaggered in, still encased in his servoarmor. The fat Trader rode an upholstered power chair.

"Come on, Hovhannes. I'll show you my latest." The madman gestured at the Midnight Beast. "I caught this one last night. Oh, she'll be prime. Biolume reticulations — rare — and that fine black hide."

The Trader peered incuriously at the Midnight Beast. "And what will you make of her, Ortolan?"

"I'm thinking about that. Beastbreaking is a patient art." Veek pondered the Midnight Beast. "But at a guess . . . maybe a warbeast. Or a domestic guardian. Ho ho. You'd never fear the pinchmasters, with her in your kennel. Eh?"

The Glimmerchild glared out at the madman with as much ferocity as he could muster. Ugly visions filled his mind: the Midnight Beast chained to a gate, guarding trinkets. Or worse: the Midnight Beast carrying some fop into the dueling lists, the Midnight Beast spilling her precious blood for a fool's honor, the Midnight Beast lying torn and discarded. He made a grunting sound of despair.

The Trader glanced at the Glimmerchild. "What's this? I thought you took only beasts."

"So I do, Hovhannes."

"But Ortolan, this is human. Or once was."

"You lie! To confuse me. I take no part in your filthy commerce, selling souls. Never say I'm a slaver! I break beasts only! That's no man! Where are its tools, its clothes, its ornaments?" He turned a madly affectionate eye on the Glimmerchild. "Like a star's nightgown, this one's skin."

"Of course, of course. My mistake; I meant no offense." The Trader fixed a placating smile on his face. The Glimmerchild watched a thought float to the top of the Trader's mind, a bubble of rancid conviction: it's all the same; we're all beasts, ancient dingwilly. The thoughts had a murderous shape, and the Glimmerchild withdrew with a shudder.

"All right!" Veek shook himself, armor clattering. "All right. Now let me show you the goods. The hunting's been fair." Veek trudged off down the line of cages, and the Glimmerchild followed his mind, touching the

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old madman lightly — just enough to see through Veek's eyes. Veek's perceptions wavered constantly. Shapes bubbled, flowed like thick water, and the bars of the cages took on a sinuous life. The Glimmerchild grew dizzy.

"Now here, here's a fine property, a spiny chumog. Highly poisonous — the tribes call it a two-beat chumog. Two heartbeats, right? Notice the armorglass cage? It throws its spines. I've trained it to stealth."

Through Veek's mad eyes, the chumog seemed a red-eyed demon: malevolent, sly, calculating.

"It attacks selectively. I show it an image of the victim, whistle a bar of 'Up Pops the Weasel,' and . . . death's a-slither!"

"Marketable," the Trader said.

Veek took a stasis vial and a sensie chip from a cagefront rack, dropped them into a rack on the Trader's chair.

The Glimmerchild understood then that the madman would not sell the Midnight Beast herself, only her cloned sisters. He felt no relief.

"And here," Veek said, moving on to the next cage. "What do you think of this?" The Glimmerchild saw a yellow hydrasnake, its tentacles knotted around a chunk of meltstone, its hundreds of tiny heads weaving in a slow, crisscrossing dance.

The Trader shrugged. "I prefer your colorful descriptions to my ignorant speculations, Ortolan."

Veek snickered. "Ah, you know just what to say. You're dangerous; why did I let you in?"

The Trader sighed. "Because I pay you well for your cell samples and your training chips. Because you don't get many visitors. Because you can trust me." Though the Glimmerchild was touching Veek's mind, a thought pulsed so strongly from the Trader that he caught it: *Because you're a fool.*

Veek turned a sharp glance at the Trader. For a brief instant, the madman's thoughts ran pure and cold. Then the fog closed in again, and Veek cackled, only a little uncertain. He took a small silver pitch pipe from his belt and blew a tone. The hydrasnake swayed as Veek swung his arm in a spritely rhythm. The creature began to hum a melody in a minor key, a hundred-voice harmony. The Glimmerchild pressed against the bars. The song was beautiful beyond anything the Glimmerchild had ever heard.

But the Trader shrugged and shook his head. "Interesting, Ortolan. But. . . ."

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"You don't want it?" Veek seemed both amazed and hurt. Then a red blaze of anger: "Why do I ever let you in? You're a bloodsucking pig; all you want are killers and fighting beasts and things ugly enough to turn jaded stomachs. Beauty — what does that mean to you?" Veek seemed to swell, to tower over the fat Trader. His armored fists were clenched; his helmeted head trembled back and forth. The hydrasnake's song faltered, died away.

The Trader raised a placating hand. "Perhaps you're right, Ortolan. I'll take it after all; your judgment is often sound."

By slow stages, Veek relaxed. He led the Trader to his other treasures, but there was a sourness to his thoughts, a weariness that quieted his madness. The Glimmerchild found himself almost pitying the old man.

Veek made the circuit of the cages, went through the motions, put his beasts through their paces, handed vials and chips to Hovhannes — but there was no pleasure in it.

Had his emotions somehow exhausted themselves? Was he doomed ever after to this weary automatism? He was afraid; he cast about for a distraction. He remembered the Trader's remark about the shiny little beast. Human? Absurd! His irritation with the Trader returned, but this time he hid it in his heart, banking the fire, hoarding the heat.

When the tour was over, he took Hovhannes back to his armored pod. A crane levered from the pod, transferred the Trader inside, where the machines that sustained the Trader's life clucked over him, touching his bulk with slender silver probes. The Trader's head rolled loosely; his eyelids drooped.

Veek watched, unleashed his madness for a moment. Suddenly he saw a frightening symbolism in the movements of the probes. Were they carrion creatures, licking at the Trader's body, tasting the death hidden inside that taut bag of guts? He almost cried out a warning; then he remembered that he was mad, and turned away.

The Glimmerchild, exhausted by the contact with Veek, curled and slept. When he woke, the dim light was unchanged. The Midnight Beast still leaned against her bars. The Glimmerchild sent her reassuring thoughts. She seemed stronger, more alert, as though she had gathered herself to make the best of this strange situation.

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A few mintues later, a small, shiny robot trundled along the aisle, pulling a high-wheeled cart. At each cage, it paused to feed the creature within.

When it reached the Midnight Beast, it lifted a bloody haunch of fenlizard from its cart and passed it through the bars. The Glimmerchild was pleased to see her fall on it hungrily.

The robot turned its black lenses on the Glimmerchild. A long arm shot through the bars and seized him by the neck. Before he could react, another arm pried his mouth open, the rubber-padded fingertips probed his teeth, and then the robot released him.

He stumbled back warily. The robot held a bowl under a spigot on the cart, set the bowl inside the cage, rolled on.

The bowl held a slurry of meat and vegetables. After a brief hesitation, he ate.

When the Midnight Beast slept, he slept.

Veek laid his hand against the switch. Light burst over the arena, illuminating a thousand surrounding cages and stasis chambers.

This morning his madness seemed weary, as if extended beyond some natural limit the day before. Anxiety pulsed through Veek. Now was no time for his madness to desert him, now when he must begin with the new beasts, now when he most needed inspiration.

At one side of the arena, Hovhannes Margolian watched from his power chair.

The beautiful black rex stood against the far wall, leashed to an iron ring. The glittering ape shifted slowly from foot to foot in a cage of shock fiber, its tiny, dark eyes fixed intently on Veek. His madness stirred, converted the ape into a caricature of a man: lipless, chinless, hairless. "Hah!" said Veek. "Look if you like."

Overhead, in the darkness above the arena lamps, Veek's security mech hovered, ready to intervene, if, as almost never happened, he lost control of his new beasts. "I'm a cautious maniac," Veek muttered.

"What do you plan, Ortolan?" The Trader's voice was flat, disinterested.

Veek took offense. Who was this slug of a Trader to dismiss Ortolan Veek? Why was Hovhannes here, if he found Veek's skills so boring? But he could not resist explaining. "I do a rare thing; I've decided to train these two as a team. When I took the rex, the ape appeared. The ape followed me. They're companions."

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Veek touched the controller he held in his armored hand, fed a small, painful charge into the ape's cage. It hopped about vigorously, making small, anguished grunts. The rex lifted high on its powerful back legs, pawed with its clawed forelegs, bellowed.

"See?" Veek shut off the cage. "The rex cares."

"How could they be companions? They're of different species, different orders."

"It's the Big Dimple. There's so much mutation here. Many creatures can't find companions of their own kind. I've seen stranger associations, by far. . . ." Veek darted a look at the Trader, caught a look of condescending tolerance. Rage overpowered Veek. "Laugh at me, will you?" He shook his fist, fumbled with the controller.

His security mech swooped down on the Trader, menacing Hovhannes with a tranquilizer rod.

"Wait," the Trader said, holding up his plump hands. "Please, Ortolan, be calm. I meant no offense, and I have no wish to wake up in one of your cages. And I do truly wish to see how you make your miracles." Hovhannes spoke easily, confidently; his face was placid.

Veek struggled to control his anger. Finally he gestured, and the mech rose back into the darkness.

He gave his attention to the beautiful rex. He had attached controller pads to the base of her skull and over the major ganglia. Veek touched the controller; her leash fell away, and a slow, sweet music played from speakers above the arena.

Veek's fingers played over the keypad of the controller. The rex danced to his tune: little, mincing, tail-swinging steps, delicately graceful. His madness receded, disappeared in the exercise of his skill. "This," he said, "this accustoms her to my touch, helps her learn to bear it. See her eyes; are they so fierce? No, no; they grow soft. . . ." Veek smiled, felt happiness spread through him. Was anything else as satisfying? No.

THE GLIMMERCHILD watched the Midnight Beast from his cage, wondered if he would dance so well when his turn came.

He touched Veek's thoughts. At the moment, Veek was calm, focused, free of that unbearable confusion. The Glimmerchild tried to reach Veek, to plead for the Midnight Beast, to make his humanity known. But he failed; the Midnight Beast possessed the only mind he

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could project his thoughts into over any distance — a result, perhaps, of their long and intimate association. If he could lay a hand on Veek's naked skin, he might be able to communicate usefully.

At least the madman was gentle. The Glimmerchild could feel the Midnight Beast's relaxing fury. He could even sense a trickle of pleasure from her. She seemed to anticipate the movements of the dance with a certain relish. His attention wandered to the fat Trader.

Black purposeful malevolence streamed from the Trader. The emotion was so strong that the Glimmerchild's gaze jerked toward him.

*Oh oh. . . .*

The Trader's vast body bulged and writhed. The Trader's mouth was stretched wide in a silent rictus of pain and glee. The Trader's skin lifted in hard lines along his arms and legs, as if his bones were trying to burst from his flesh. A large, round shape bulged from the Trader's vast belly. The stretching skin split suddenly and peeled back, spattering blood. From the ragged wounds rose shiny black rods, articulated into a nightmare shape. A skull-like head broke from the Trader's belly, shedding tattered skin.

Veek's back was turned, all his attention on the dance.

In an instant the killmech stood free. Tiny red eyes locked on Veek's back. The Trader held a controller similar to Veek's; now he punched at bloody keys, and the killmech sprang forward, a blur.

It slapped away Veek's controller before the madman even knew it was there. A punchgun rose from its crest and fired up into the darkness. Pieces of Veek's shattered mech rained down. It flung its slender limbs around Veek's servoarmor, a black spider.

Rage detonated in Veek's mind, making the Glimmerchild's head hurt. Servomotors whined, as Veek struggled to free himself. Just as quickly, the rage evaporated, leaving nothing but a cool watchfulness. Veek stood meekly in the killmech's grip.

The Glimmerchild realized that the Midnight Beast, free of the controller's compulsion, was preparing to spring at her tormentor. BE STILL; DON'T MOVE; NOT A QUIVER! he shouted silently. He pushed the thought at her with so much force that his vision went dark for a moment.

She froze, as if immobilized by the controller.

The Trader was laughing. "Got you, oh, got you, old fool," he shouted. He shook his controller at Veek. "Now you'll dance to *my* tune!"

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The Trader's mind was so hot with triumph that the Glimmerchild could not touch it. The Glimmerchild was confused; who was the madman here?

"Clever," Veek observed. "Why?"

"Why? You ask why?" The Trader's lips pursed; he blew out a gusty breath. "Because I won't ever have to pay you again. Because of your insults; you'll never speak so to me again. Because it's beneath my dignity to humor filthy madmen, and henceforth you'll break the beasts *I* want you to break, for the purposes I select. Yes! But mostly for the fun of it. The fun of it, Veek!"

"You enjoy besting fools, Hovhannes?"

The Trader frowned. "Peel him," he told the killmech.

The arena filled with the sound of tearing metal, snapping conduit. Then Veek stood naked in the midst of his scattered armor, his thin old body wrinkled and white, marked here and there by purple stains from the armor's sensor pads. His colorless hair stood up in wild tufts, giving him the look of a startled bird. His narrow face was composed. The killmech gripped his arm.

"How do you plan to control me?" Veek asked, smiling.

The Trader smiled back. "Ah, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking of all the crude ways of making slaves obedient — like the ones you use in your animals — chemicals, crude electromechanical devices, and so forth. Marionette makers. No, I'll use nothing so clumsy on you. After all, we wouldn't want to impair your famous skills, eh? What would be the point?"

"Right," Veek said dryly. His smile slipped.

The Trader extended his open hand. In it lay a bit of shiny metal. "In a minute you'll sleep, Ortolan. Then this little worm will crawl into your ear, burrow down to the base of your brain, and make one small change in your emotional balance."

Veek made a small, wordless, hopeless sound.

"Just like the fairy tale," chortled the Trader. "When you open your eyes, you'll love the first thing you see; you'll do anything to please your beloved. Your skills will be intact. You'll be so anxious to please, so anxious."

The Trader activated his chair, lifted from the packed sand of the arena, moved toward Veek. "Guess who?" the Trader said. "Guess who'll

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be hovering over you as you wake. Not a princess, sadly."

"Depressing," Veek said, and looked away.

"'The world is a pot, and man is a spoon in it' — so goes the proverb. Also, Ortolan, I regret to say that this great love will leave no scope for your madness. I know you'll miss it, but what's to be done?" The Trader nodded, and the killmech pressed an injector to Veek's thin neck. The old man's eyes rolled back, and he slumped into the mech's arms.

"Well," said the Trader, almost gently. "It was never as entertaining a madness as you thought." The Trader's chair floated forward, passing quite close to the immobile Midnight Beast.

The Glimmerchild touched her mind.

She took one swift step; her head snaked out; her jaws crunched.

The headless corpse bucked, and the fat fingers drummed against the controller. Dropping Veek, the killmech sprang up, performed a capering dance, smashed into the wall, and fell down, still kicking. The Midnight Beast chewed reflectively. She swallowed. The Trader seemed to die as slowly as a beheaded snake, as though the machines within that vast body could not stop grinding away.

But finally the corpse was still, and the killmech ceased its aimless thumping. The Glimmerchild called the Midnight Beast to him, and with a casual sweep of her foreclaws, she tore away the fibrous bars of his cage. She knelt for him to mount. He was about to climb to her smooth back, when he looked up at Veek's captives.

Their cold loneliness swept over him, choked him, almost drowned him in sadness. Painful tears squeezed from his eyes. *No,* he thought. *What can I do?*

Presently he went over to the Trader's chair and began to search. For long minutes he thought he would not find the mindworm; finally a silver glitter winked from the red sand, and his fingers closed on it.

He knelt beside Ortolan Veek. *I'm a little sorry,* the Glimmerchild thought. He dropped the worm into Veek's crusty ear.

He hoped he had properly understood the thing's mechanism.

Veek woke full of lucid terror, though he could not remember what he feared. He opened his eyes.

He saw his beasts, in their cages and stasis chambers, stacked to the high roof of the nexus. Love exploded in him, an intensity that made

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all the other passions of his long life seem pale.

He wanted to touch each one, to throw his arms around each scaly, hairy, slimy, spiny creature. Tears ran from his eyes.

He sensed movement at his side. He turned, saw the ape. He reached out, gripped the creature's hard arm. It looked at him from deep-set eyes, and Veek fell choking into those two dark whirlpools.

He tossed on a shallow, bitter ocean. The slow, hopeless pain of his beasts broke over him, dragged him under, rolled his heart over sharp stones. He screamed, and tearing sobs burst from him.

"What did I do?" he cried. "How could I have?" In his agony, he rolled away from the shining ape, and the ocean spit him out.

But the pain was still with him, and the love.

The first to go were the beautiful black rex and her small, bright rider. Veek watched them trot out into the night with mingled sorrow and pleasure.

Next he pried open the Trader's landwalker, set its autopilot to take the slave train out to a territory where slaving was illegal.

His last beast, a big red stonemole, wandered forth into the ruins a week later, and then Veek's nexus was empty, except for memories.

He stood there, watching, until the stonemole merged with the shadows. His madness had abandoned him. For an instant only, he felt the loss of it, as bittersweet as the loss of a beloved and treacherous friend.

For a while wonders walked the ruins, and there was more of death and more of beauty than anyone could remember.

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# SCIENCE

## ISAAC ASIMOV

## DOWN THE ELECTRON STREAM

ON MAY 31, 1990, I had lunch at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., along with some forty other Americans and a number of Soviet citizens as well. Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Soviet Union, was the host.

Ray Bradbury was the only other science fiction writer present, and we were there, I gathered, because our books were popular in the Soviet Union. President Gorbachev mentioned us specifically in the talk he gave, and Ray and I were both terribly pleased that we were the occasion for this plug for science fiction.

The lunch was scheduled to be over at 2:30 P.M., and my dear wife, Janet, was waiting for me downstairs in the Embassy. (There was no room for mates at the lunch, but the Embassy people took good care of her.) When 2:45 P.M. came and the luncheon was still going strong, I felt I could not remain away from Janet any longer, and I was well aware, in addition, that I had a train to make. Consequently, I whispered my goodbyes and left quietly.

Since I was the first person out of the building, I was leaped upon by a horde of reporters who asked the questions you might expect. ("What was Gorbachev like?" "What did he say?")

One question amused me particularly, however. It was, "Why on Earth would Gorbachev want to see you people?"

The proper answer would have been: "Search me! Why don't you ask him?"

That, however, would not have given satisfaction. Instead, I said, "I suppose Gorbachev felt that a politician should not spend his time speaking only with other politicians."

The reporters scribbled it down but, as far as I know, that statement wasn't used in any of the reports on the event.

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My reason for saying it was a very simple one. It is merely an extension of something that I have believed for many years — that scientists should not speak only with other scientists.

It seems to me extremely important that scientists should spend an adequate portion of their time speaking to non-scientists, trying to get across to the wider public what science means, what scientists have done and are doing and, just as important, perhaps gathering what the wider public thinks of science and what its hopes and fears of science and technology might be.

It is because of this belief of mine that I have spent so large a portion of my life writing and speaking about science and technology to the general public. And it is the essay series in this magazine, which has been continuing now, without a break, for a third of a century, that I consider my most important contribution in this direction.

So let us continue—

In my last three essays I have discussed the production, by chemical means, of, first, images, then colored images, and finally moving images. Now we pass on to the electronic production of images.

In the July 1982 issue of F&SF, in my essay, "The Three Who Died Too Soon," I described the discovery, in 1888, of very long-wave radiation by the German physicist Heinrich Rudolph Hertz (1857-1894).

The radiation was called "Hertzian waves" to begin with. They were part of the family of electromagnetic radiations, of which visible light is the best-known member. Hertzian waves are a million and more times as long as light-waves, but except for that they are light-like in character.

It didn't take long for people to realize that radio waves could be made to send messages, just as light waves could. You could send a message in Morse code by blinking a light on and off in long and short intervals, and you could do the same with Hertzian waves.

Hertzian waves had the advantage of having wavelengths so long they could go through fog and either through or around obstacles, which light could not do. Hertzian waves had the disadvantage, however, of being difficult to detect. After all, we have eyes with which to see light, but no sense organ that would pick up Hertzian waves.

Hertz had both produced and detected the radio waves by the use of a wire loop with a small airgap. In one of these, an alternating current sent sparks across the gap, creating Hertzian waves; and these in turn, produced sparks, jumping the gap in the other loop, or detector, to

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which no electric source was attached.

A French physicist, Edouard Eugene Branly (1844-1940), improved on the detector, in 1890, by using a glass tube filled with metal filings to which wires and a battery were attached. When Hertzian waves fell on the tube, they pushed the powder together, making it more compact and coherent, and increasing its electrical conductivity so that a current flashed through it from the battery. With the use of this "coherer," Branly could detect Hertzian waves at a distance of 135 meters.

The device was improved by the British physicist Oliver Joseph Lodge (1851-1940). He succeeded in detecting signals at a distance of 800 meters and could send messages in Morse code by turning the Hertzian waves on and off.

This opened the way to sending messages by radiation alone, instead of by electric currents across wires as in the case of the telegraph, which had been invented a half-century earlier. The new method therefore came to be called "wireless telegraphy," a phrase the British eventually shortened simply to "wireless."

Since radiation, rather than an electric current, was used to transmit the messages, it could also be called "radiotelegraphy," which Americans eventually shortened simply to "radio." As a result, Hertzian waves came to be called "radio waves."

Lodge's device still came under the heading of a laboratory curiosity, but, in 1894, an Italian electrical engineer, Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), became interested in the matter.

He found that he could send out stronger signals and receive them over longer distances if he grounded the generator and receiver and added a wire that reached up into the air. (The latter was called an "antenna" because it resembled an insect's feeler.)

A Russian physicist, Alexander Stepanovich Popov (1859-1906), used an antenna even earlier, but he was interested chiefly in the scientific investigation of lightning, while Marconi turned to the commercialization of the technique, so it is Marconi who gets (and should get) the credit for what followed.

Using his antennas, Marconi could, in 1895, send and detect radio waves across a distance of 3 kilometers. In 1896, he went to Great Britain (his mother was Irish, by the way) and sent a signal across a distance of 14 kilometers. He then applied for, and obtained, the first patent in the history of radio.

In 1897, again in Italy, he sent a signal from land to a ship nearly 20 kilometers away, and, in 1898, back

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in Great Britain, he detected radio waves at a distance of nearly 30 kilometers.

By 1898, moreover, he was beginning to make his system commercial. The British physicist Lord Kelvin (1824-1907) paid to send a "Marconigram" to another British physicist, George Gabriel Stokes (1819-1903). That was the first commercial radio message. Marconi also used his signals to report the yacht races at Kingstown Regatta that year.

Then, in 1901, came a climax. Although radio waves travel in straight lines, Marconi had already convinced himself that they would follow the curve of the Earth's sphere. (They do this, it was eventually discovered, by bouncing off layers of electrically-charged atoms in the upper atmosphere.)

He therefore sent a message — the Morse-code signal for the letter "S" — from the southwestern tip of England, using balloons to lift the antenna as high as possible. On December 12, 1901, he succeeded in having the signal received in Newfoundland, across the width of the Atlantic Ocean, and that date is usually taken as the birth of radio.

In 1904, a demonstration of radio operation was a big hit at the St. Louis World's Fair, and, in 1909, Marconi received a share of the Nobel Prize for physics.

So far, radio was still only a Morse-code device. A Canadian-American physicist, Reginald Aubrey Fessenden (1866-1932), developed a new and better way of generating radio waves, involving high-frequency alternating currents. He also worked out a way of making the radio waves increase and decrease in height (or "amplitude") in such a way that the line marking out the heights of successive radio-wave peaks marked out the irregularities of a particular sound-wave. This was called "amplitude modulation" and was abbreviated "AM."

Sound waves could be converted into modulated radio waves that could be sent out. When these were received, they could be converted back into the original sound waves. As a result, radio messages could consist of words and music. The first such message, sending out music from a transmitter on the Massachusetts coast, was picked up and carried on December 24, 1906.

Radio signals were still terribly weak, however, and detecting them was chancy and required expert manipulation.

In 1883, however, Edison, trying to lengthen the lifetime of the electric light bulbs he had invented seven years earlier, sealed a metal wire into the light bulb near the hot filament. That did nothing to

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lengthen the filament's lifetime, but, to Edison's surprise, electricity followed from the hot filament to the metal wire, across the vacuum gap. This was called the "Edison effect."

After the electron was discovered in 1895, the Edison effect was explained. In experiments conducted between 1900 and 1903, the British physicist Owen Willans Richardson (1879-1959) showed that the electricity flowed because a stream of electrons boiled out of the hot filament. In 1928, when the consequences of this discovery had become plain, Richardson received a Nobel Prize in physics.

Once a stream of electrons was shown to exist, the problem was to control the flow. It could, as it turned out, be controlled far more quickly and delicately than could an electric current through a wire. The use of streams of electrons in place of electric currents is called "electronics," and devices that made use of such streams were "electronic devices."

The first electronic device was produced, in 1904, by a British electrical engineer, John Ambrose Fleming (1849-1945). He surrounded the filament with a thin cylindrical metal plate. He found that electrons boiled out of the hot filament only when the plate carried a positive electric charge that attracted the electrons out of the filament. When the plate carried a negative-charge, it repelled the electrons and kept them from emerging from the filament.

Fleming made use of an alternating current (the current flowing in each direction in rapid alternation), and this had the plate alternate between negative and positive charge. There would be an intermittent burst of electrons each time the plate was positive. This meant that though an alternating current flowed into the evacuated device, an intermittent direct current (in only one direction) flowed out. The conversion of alternating to direct current is "rectification," so the device is a "rectifier."

Fleming called it a "valve," because it allowed electricity to flow through it in one direction only. In the United States it came to be called a "tube" for some reason. Scientists call it a "diode," for it has two electrodes, the filament and the plate.

The American inventor Lee De Forest (1873-1961) added a refinement to Fleming's tube in 1906. He inserted a perforated plate, or "grid," between the filament and the solid plate, making it a "triode." The grid was closer to the filament than the plate was, and slight changes in the intensity of a positive charge upon it could result in great changes in

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the intensity of the electron stream.

If, then, the grid receives a varying electric current such as that produced by an amplitude-modulated radio wave, it produces a much stronger current that exactly imitates the modulation. In short, the triode serves as an "amplifier," strengthening a weak current without distorting its characteristics.

Such triodes (and numerous modifications thereof) could be used in devices that sent out and received radio messages, making the task much simpler and more nearly within the range of ability of people who were not expert radio engineers. As a result, the triode came to be called a "radio tube," and they were indispensable adjuncts to radio sets for nearly half a century.

In 1910, De Forest was using his tube-amplified radio system to transmit the singing of the great tenor Enrico Caruso (1873-1921), and, in 1916, he established a radio station and was broadcasting news. When he first tried to finance his invention, by the way, so unbelievable did his claims seem to be that he was placed under arrest for using the mails to defraud. In the end, however, he sold the patent rights to his amplifier to American Telephone and Telegraph for $390,000.

Even with radio tubes, however, it was still tricky to try to tune radios to receive a particular wavelength, and once found, those wavelengths were easy to lose. Trying to receive a broadcast was still an adventure, therefore, and a strain on anyone's patience.

During World War I, however, an American electrical engineer, Edwin Howard Armstrong (1890-1954), was trying to detect enemy airplanes by sound-waves. It seemed to him that it might be more sensitive and efficient to detect the electromagnetic waves set up by the planes' ignition systems. Those waves were too high in frequency (that is, too short in wavelength) to be received easily, so Armstrong devised a circuit that lowered the frequency and then amplified it. He named it a "superheterodyne receiver."

Actually, this was developed too late to play a role in the war itself, but it could be put to use in radio reception. With the addition of a superheterodyne receiver, radios could be tuned very easily by the turn of a dial. Now, at last, radios became popular with the general public, to the point, indeed, where radio sets became a common article of living room furniture.

In 1921, regular radio programs were begun by a station in Pittsburgh, and, thereafter, other stations were set up in rapid succession. By 1924, presidential election returns were broadcast by radio, and by the

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end of the decade, programs featuring Amos and Andy and the crooner Rudy Vallee became national obsessions.

There remained the problem of static. Thunderstorms and electrical appliances modulate the amplitude of the carrier waves that transmit messages from broadcasting station to receiver, and do so in random fashion. The result is an unpleasant noise that interferes with the words and music we are trying to hear.

In 1935, Armstrong worked out a system whereby the carrier was modulated not by amplitude (loudness) but by frequency (pitch). This "frequency modulation" of "FM" worked just as well as "AM" did and was not interfered with by those things that were a source of static in amplitude modulation.

Radio gives us only sound, of course. Is it possible that we can also get visual images by electronic means?

The principle of transmitting photographs or any visual image was clear enough even without the use of electron streams. A beam of light is allowed to pass through a photographic film and to fall on a photosensitive plate behind. The beam of light scans the photograph systematically and reaches the plate, being brighter or dimmer, depending on what portion of the photograph it passes through.

The photosensitive plate might contain a coating of the element selenium, which, in 1873, had been found to have its electrical conductivity affected by light. In the presence of light, it is much more conductive than in darkness, and the stronger the light the greater the conductivity.

As the light scan progresses across the photosensitive plate, it is therefore transformed into a varying electric current that mimics the changing brightness of the scan. The varying electric current is transmitted along a wire and, at the other end, can be reconverted into the original pattern of light and dark. In this way, a photograph is transmitted by wire, and the first such "wirephoto" was transmitted between London and Paris in 1907.

By that time, a Russian scientist, Boris Rosing, suggested the obvious — that if a series of images were scanned and sent over the wire, the images could be made to give the illusion of motion, as was true in motion pictures, which I described last month. In that way, you could transmit motion as it was happening, and you would have what came to be called "television."

It was easy to suggest it, but the trick was to find a method of scanning that was sufficiently delicate and rapid. The usual method for

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producing wirephotos in those early days was to have little holes arranged in a spiral pattern on a plate. As the plate spun, light passed through the holes and scanned the photograph systematically. That worked well enough for wirephotos, but it would never have been adequate for even the most primitive form of television.

There was, however, something else in the works. Scientists had been studying cathode-ray tubes as long before as the 1880s. The cathode-ray tube is an evacuated device that contains two electrodes. A stream of electrons (or "cathode-ray particles," as they were called before it was understood what electrons were) poured through the vacuum from the negative electrode when it was heated. The stream could be made to hit the glass at the other end, and the energy of the motion of the particles was converted into light. A spot of light appeared where the electrons hit the glass.

If the cathode-ray tube were subjected to an electromagnetic field, the stream of electrons (which carried a negative electric charge) was deflected and the spot of light changed position.

In 1897, a German physicist, Karl Ferdinand Braun (1850-1918), modified a cathode-ray tube in such a way that the particles could be easily affected by an electromagnetic field of varying intensity. The spot of light therefore moved up and down and left to right, in such a way as to visualize the variation in intensity in the form of a wave. He called this an "oscillograph."

In 1908, therefore, a British electrical engineer, A. A. Campbell Swinton, suggested that an oscillograph could be used to produce images at one end, to convert them into radio waves of appropriate modulations, transmit those radio waves and receive them on another oscillograph that would reconvert them into images. In short, the glass end of one cathode-ray tube could act as a television camera, and the glass end of another as a television screen.

That, too, was easier to say than to do. Nevertheless, in 1926, a British inventor, John Logie Baird (1888-1946), managed to turn the trick. He used oscillographs that scanned an image by sending a beam of light across the image from one side to the other, first along the top, then a little farther down, then a little farther down still, until thirty lines had been scanned from top to bottom.

Since electron streams were used, it was done very rapidly and delicately. The whole scanning was completed in a tenth of a second, and then repeated in the next tenth

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of a second, and so on.

Although at any one instant in time, there was only a single spot of light on the screen, of some particular brightness or other, the persistence of vision that I mentioned last month made it possible to see the entire screen as a pattern of light and dark, and, moreover, as a result of successive scannings, to see the image move.

Baird's picture was very small and it flickered badly, so that it was merely a laboratory curiosity, however. There was no chance of it having commercial possibilities.

The next step was taken by a Russian-American physicist, Vladimir Kosma Zworykin (1889-1982), who developed the first practical television camera in 1938. (His first patent in this direction was filed as early as 1923.) He called it an "iconoscope," from Greek words meaning "to see images."

In the iconoscope, the rear of the camera was coated with a large number of tiny cesium-silver droplets. Each emits electrons as the light beam scans it, and does so in proportion to the brightness of the light. If the light beam is reflected from some particular view, the pattern of light and dark in the reflection is mimicked by the pattern of electrons in greater and lesser quantity issuing from the droplets. This creates a varying electric current that can be reconverted into a light-and-dark pattern on a television screen many kilometers away.

After that it was a matter of refinement. In place of Baird's 30 lines, 10 times a second; there were perhaps 525 lines, 30 times a second. The stage was set for the commercial appearance of television, but World War II broke out and placed everything on hold. It was not till after the end of the war that television finally reached the general public in quantity.

By 1949, there were a million television sets in the United States, and I don't have to describe the growth since. It is frequently said that there are more television sets in the United States than there are bathtubs, and the disparity may be greater in other nations.

By the mid-1950s, color television was beginning to come in.

At the heart of the electronic devices that were sweeping the world were the various radio tubes that made them all practical. It seems rather ungrateful to point out that they were also weak spots in those devices.

Each radio tube had to be fairly large, since enough vacuum had to be enclosed for filament, grid, and various plates to be far enough apart so that electrons wouldn't jump the gap until encouraged to do so. This

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meant that radio tubes were relatively expensive and bulky. They were also fragile and were short-lived, since the filaments, which had to be operated at high temperatures, gradually evaporated and broke and since the tiniest leak ruined the vacuum. In addition, there was always a time-consuming "warm-up" period since the tubes wouldn't work until the filament was hot enough to emit electrons properly. (Fragility was a particular characteristic of early television sets, and those of us who watched TV avidly in the 1950s remember well when the TV-repairman was virtually a live-in member of the family.)

Tubes were not the only devices that can act as rectifiers and amplifiers, however. Braun, who invented the oscilloscope, also showed that certain crystals would work as rectifiers. This was useful in early radios which were referred to as "crystal sets," and Braun shared the Nobel Prize with Marconi in 1909 as a result.

The crystals used in those early days were unreliable, and the proper spots on them had to be found. They were replaced by the far superior radio tubes when they came in.

But then, in 1948, the British-American physicist William Bradford Shockley (1910-1982) and his two American colleagues, Walter Houser Brattain (1902-1987) and John Bardeen (b. 1908), discovered a new kind of crystal that was named by a colleague, John Robinson Pierce (b. 1910), a "transistor." Because transistors did the work of a vacuum tube within the confines of a solid crystal and without requiring the use of a vacuum, they are called "solid-state devices."

By the mid-1950s, techniques had been worked out for developing reliable transistors and they began to be produced in quantity.

Because they were solid-state devices, they were rugged, did not break down, and did not develop leaks. They worked at room temperature so there was no warm-up period and they didn't burn out.

Most of all, they were small and cheap. Any device using radio tubes could be made much smaller ("miniaturization") by substituting transistors. (This is not quite true of television sets, for there, whatever else is made smaller, the television screen must remain large and must take time to warm up, too.)

As early as 1953, for instance, the old, bulky and embarrassing hearing aids were reduced in size by the use of transistors to the point where they could be fitted into the earpieces of spectacles and plugged unobtrusively into the ear canal.

As time went on, it was found

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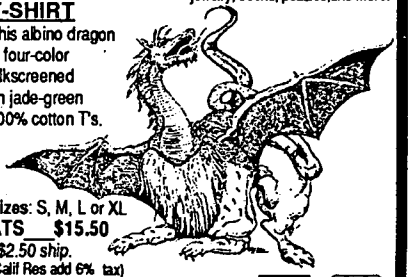

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that solid-state devices could be made smaller and smaller; they became tiny "chips" and even tinier "microchips" on which electric circuits could be etched under a microscope.

Radios became small enough to fit into a vest pocket and played instantly when the switch was pushed. The same is true of computers, so that we now have vest-pocket computers that cost very little, consume virtually no energy, and are more rapid, complex and versatile than the huge energy-drunk computers that covered whole walls in the medieval 1950s.

Tiny, transistorized computers make it possible to produce machines that are capable of fulfilling complex repetitive tasks and have thus introduced "robots" to the world.

There could be no space age without transistors. The rockets and probes sent out into space could not be controlled and guided properly without advanced computers, and probes could do very little in the way of observing, recording, and sending back information were they not crammed full of tiny, complex transistorized devices.

In fact, after considering the airplane, the radio and the television set, one can only conclude that the greatest invention of the twentieth century was the transistor.

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*Sheri Tepper wrote "The Gazebo" (October 1990), a story that impressed many of you. "Raccoon Music" concerns the bizarre further adventures of Carol Magusen, the heroine of the earlier story, and you will be pleased to hear that other episodes of "Crazy Carol" on the road are forthcoming.*

# Raccoon Music

**By Sheri S. Tepper**

CAROL CROSSED THE Colorado line early in the morning of her fiftieth birthday, after sleeping most of the night at a rest stop just outside Hays, Kansas. She was headed for Arizona. She'd bought a map at a gas station in Hays, but she hadn't decided yet whether to go through New Mexico or through Utah.

When he sold her the map, the gas station man had advised New Mexico.

"Ma'am," he said, looking at her battered little car with a bemused expression. "Fy's you. I wun't try goin' over the high passes. I don't think you'll make it."

He'd pointed out a route for her. Down through Pueblo and Trinidad and over the low pass at Raton rather than attempting the lengthy, straining hauls of the continental divide. He patted her car almost fondly. "This here vee-hickle is sort of on its last mile, you know?"

Carol admitted she knew. Richard had called it a junker, and it was. One of the last of the bugs, with over 150,000 miles on it.

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"Wun't drive it no further than needful," he commented, wiping his hands on an oily rag prior to fishing her change out of the cash register. "Wun't drive it at night at all."

"Why's that?" she asked.

"Nobody around to help. Drive it in the daytime, there's highway patrol and all. Nighttime, I swear those guys disappear like prairie dogs down a hole. Nossir, you stay on the main highway, and you drive daytime."

When she stopped in Limon, Colorado, however, and told the gas station man there what the man in Kansas had told her, he snorted and shook his head. "Kansans," he said. "Most of 'em have never even been out here. If you're going to New Mexico, there's nothing wrong with State Highway 71 due south to Rocky Ford, then State Highway 10 to Walsenburg. There's plenty of traffic there," he said. "And it'll save you a lot of miles."

So she turned off on State Highway 71 and headed south, into a foreverland of rolling dun prairie. It looked a lot like Kansas, she thought, concentrating on the road. No reason it shouldn't look a lot like Kansas, of course, except, when you thought of Colorado, you thought of mountains. She could see the mountains — or what she assumed were the mountains; the tops of them, anyway — way over there in the west, a wavy blue line at the horizon. Of course, it could be clouds, too. No mountains where she was. Where she was, it was just undulating beige-colored not-much, with nothing going on in it at all. As for traffic, she didn't know what the gas station man had been talking about. She hadn't seen another car for the past half hour.

"... the past half hour...," she said out loud, hitting the steering wheel with her hand for emphasis. As though offended by this comment, the engine sputtered and died. She let the bug roll onto the shoulder of the road, then tried to start it again, without success. She sat there for some time, composing the really nasty letter she was going to send to that gas station man. All he'd wanted to do was contradict the man in Kansas, that's all. Pride, that's all it was. Evil pride. If she'd done what the man from Kansas said, she'd have been fine. There'd have been cars going by, highway patrol....

As it was, there was nothing much in any direction. No farmhouses. Lots of barbed-wire fence, but nothing behind it but prairie.

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And here it was her birthday, too! She'd promised herself wherever she was by nightfall, she'd buy herself a whole pint of double-chocolate ice cream, and now it looked by nightfall she'd be sleeping out here among the cacti.

Ahead of her, just too far away to read, was a little road sign. Carol got out of the car and walked toward it. Knowing where she was might make her feel better.

"Coonyville Town Limits, one mile," said the sign. Carol stared at it, then at the road, then at the sign again. It was a clean, neat, road-department-type sign, black on white. Not weathered. Not half falling down — which would have been more in keeping with the surroundings, because she could see a mile down the road, and there wasn't anything there. Flat and more flat.

Slightly rolling flat, she corrected herself. Slightly rolling flat. There might be something down there a mile, hidden in some kind of valley or cut. Possibly.

She trudged back to the car and wrote a note: "Gone to Coonyville for help." If the highway patrol did come along, at least they'd know where she was. She put the note in the side window, took her warm coat out of the backseat, locked the car doors, and turned south once more. Her shoes were fine for walking. She never wore any that weren't, never had, even when she'd worked at the library. No point in getting broken-down feet just to look stylish. Richard had always fussed at her about her shoes, but then, Richard had fussed about everything.

After about two-thirds of a mile, she came to a hill. It didn't look like much, but by the time she'd reached the top, she knew she'd been climbing. And down on the other side of it was Coonyville, just as she'd suspected it might be, hidden in a little swale along a creek. Bare cottonwoods drooped over half a dozen dilapidated buildings joined by stretches of halfhearted fence. The corpses of two ancient gas pumps, their glass-topped heads in terminal stages of glaucoma, leaned together in front of a boarded-up gas station. Next door, a small white frame building proclaimed itself "Post Office."

Carol trudged down the hill, passing a sign that said, "Welcome to Connyville, population 10." Unlike the road sign, it was faded, peeling, and perforated with bullet holes.

Under the "Post Office" sign, Carol negotiated a screen door that

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shrieked and a wooden door that stuck. Inside was a rack of some thirty post boxes, a line of shelves laden with odds and ends of groceries and supplies, and a grilled window through to some shadowed interior space. Through the window, Carol could hear the sound of voices, arguing. One male, one female.

"Hey!" she shouted in her loudest voice. "Anybody home?"

The argument ceased abruptly, as though cut off by a knife. Footsteps approached slowly, then a face was thrust around a corner to peer through the grill. White hair fringing wrinkled cheeks, faded eyes staring through bottle-bottom glasses. "Honey, I'm sorry. I didn't hear your car."

"No car," Carol shrugged apologetically. "It stopped on me, about a mile outside of town."

"Oh my, my. And you came wantin' to use the phone."

"I came wanting a mechanic, actually," said Carol.

The old woman cackled. "Well, that's usin' the phone, honey. This is Coonyville, population two. No mechanic here. Except Leroy — that's my grandson. You think it's something Leroy could fix?"

Someone appeared behind the old woman, someone fish-pale, wraith-thin, clad in a faded blue-plaid shirt, with a quantity of greasy hair hanging in putative ringlets. He stared out at her like an unkempt ghoul, mouth slightly open.

"Leroy," the old woman said. "This lady's car broke down just outside of town. You think you could take the tractor and haul it in here for her? Maybe take a look at it."

Leroy took a small canister from his shirt pocket, opened it, fished out a pinch of snuff, and stuffed it into his mouth, showing a quantity of snaggled brown teeth in process. "Could," he admitted. "Won't." He chewed reflectively. "'Less she pays me."

"Leroy, you're not doin' anythin' else," the woman objected. "And it's my tractor and my gas."

"So you say," he sneered. "Like you say about ever'thin'."

"Well, what's mine is mine," she cried. "An' you're not gettin' your hands on it till I'm dead and gone. Why don' you go move to California, like Buck Henry keeps askin' you? Why you keep hangin' on here?"

He grinned at her, showing his teeth.

"I'd be willing to pay something," said Carol tentatively.

"Twenty bucks," he said at once, as though he'd been thinking it over.

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It seemed exorbitant. "Ten. But I'll give you twenty if you can fix what's wrong."

He looked at her as though measuring her for a coffin. Then he turned without a word and went into the dim recesses of the room behind.

"He'll bring it in," the woman said. "He's a good boy." She said this tentatively, trying the words to see how they sounded, as though hoping they might prove prophetic.

"He's your grandson?" asked Carol, making conversation.

"Well, he is and he isn't," the old woman said, opening the gate beneath the window and coming into the outer room. "He's my daughter's first husband's boy by his first wife, is who he is. My daugher had him from a baby, though. She always thought of Leroy as her boy."

"What did Leroy think about it?" Carol asked, peering out the window at the rattling, faded green tractor that went clattering up onto the road.

"Hard to tell sometimes what Leroy thinks," she said. "My name's Molly Olsen, by the way."

"Carol. . . ." She started to say "Carol Morrison," and then thought better of it. Morrison was Richard's name, and she was through with Richard. "Carol Magusen," she said. "How do you do?"

"Better some days than others," Molly replied. "But then, that's true for everbody, isn' it? Better some days than others. I wish that boy would find something to do."

"What . . . what happened to his parents?"

"Oh, Roy — that's my daughter's husband, Leroy's daddy — he died when Leroy was only about ten. Fell in a grease pit and broke his neck. Left Leroy without a man to tend to him. My daughter, Alice, she couldn't do a thing with him. Then Alice, she got married again. He was a good man, too; I liked him. Virgil was his name. He was a Marine in the war. Hell on discipline, he was. He got right after Leroy, and I was so glad to see it. He'd have made something of that boy if he and my daughter and my little grandbabies hadn' been kilt. Laura and Louise was their names."

"I'm sorry," breathed Carol. "That's so sad."

"Kilt in a accident. Car they were in went off the road and kilt 'em all. Woulda kilt Leroy, too, 'cept he'd stayed home that day."

"So you took him in."

"Well, not right away, but then later I did. When he was about sixteen."

"How old is he now?"

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"Oh, he's almost twenty now. I wouldn't mind him if he wasn't just so bone lazy. I swear, I never knew anybody so lazy as that boy. Too lazy to pass wind — that's what my pa always said."

Too lazy to brush his teeth or wash his hair, added Carol silently. Not prepossessing.

"You want some coffee?" the old woman asked. "I've got a fresh pot out back."

They went back through a dim room furnished with piled boxes and derelict furniture, through a shadowed hall where narrow stairs went up drunkenly into the darkness, and then into a big, cluttered kitchen that was obviously where Molly lived. Two shabby chairs confronted one another across a well-scrubbed table. On a shelf under a low window stood a line of shiny aspidistras with tattered envelopes thrust between and among them, Molly's filing system.

"I even moved my bed in here," Molly said, pointing to the neatly made daybed in the corner. "Got to be too much trouble, keepin' house. I only need one room, and the bathroom's right next door. That's about what I can keep clean, and I sort of let the rest of it go."

"Where does Leroy stay?"

"Oh, he fixed himself a place over the old garage." Molly led Carol to the window and pointed to a ramshackle building some fifty feet from the house. "He thought he'd get girls to come there, where it was private. I told him, 'Leroy, you want girls to pay attention to you, you'll have to wash yourself. Have to get your teeth fixed, get a haircut.' He didn't listen. Oh well, I suppose he'll learn for hisself. He keeps his motorcycle there, and his tools. He really can fix things, when he's a mind to."

Carol returned with the old woman to the table, where two steaming cups of coffee breathed welcoming fragrance. She had the cup at her lips, when she heard a peculiar noise above her. There was nothing above her but the ceiling, yet the noise had been up there somewhere. It was almost musical. Tinky tunk. Three notes.

"Raccoon music," said Molly matter-of-factly.

"Excuse me?" said Carol.

"In the attic," Molly nodded. "Coons. Up there, rummaging around. They've found something they like the sound of, that's all." She sipped and swallowed, staring nearsightedly out the window. "They'll do it with two rocks, knockin' together, or a tree branch. I 'member once when I was a kid,

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they found something or other out in the old barn, sounded like real music."

"Something or other?"

"Well . . . I guess an old mandolin or something. Lots of stuff out there. It's burned down since."

"What happened to it? The mandolin?"

"Pa went up and took it and broke it up. Said it kep' him awake, them playin' on it."

"They really did?" Carol laughed. "I never heard of that."

"Pa hadn't, either. Made him real grumpy 'cause it sounded so much like real music. A tune and ever'thin'."

"Well, if it sounded like it, it probably was," Carol said definitely. "Birds can sing. Why can't raccoons make music?"

"Never thought of it like that," said Molly. "Lookee there, there's Leroy with your car."

There was Leroy with the car, which reminded Carol that the keys were in her pockets, and the car had been left locked with the brake on. How the hell . . . ? She was at the back door in time to observe Leroy jumping down from the tractor, opening the car door, and pulling out her suitcase. He put it on the top of the car and tried to open it.

Carol pushed the door open and ran out. "Hey," she cried. "Let that alone."

He shrugged, turning toward her. "I was just gonna get what you owe me."

"I'll pay you what I owe you," she said breathlessly. "When you've looked at the car and told me whether you can fix it or not. If not, I need to call somebody to come tow it."

He laughed nastily. "Goin' to cost you more to tow that thing than it's worth. You better hope it's something I can fix."

"Well, suppose you get to it," said Molly from behind Carol. "Lady said she'd pay you when you've fixed it, if you're gonna." She glared at her grandson, picked up Carol's suitcase, and staggered with it back into the house.

Carol followed her, quite breathless from anger. Not that there was anything in the suitcase Leroy would have found useful or valuable. All her money was in her purse, and her purse was lying on the kitchen table. All too vulnerable. There had to be a better place for the money, at least

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temporarily. While Molly's back was turned, she removed two tens, then hid the wallet behind one of the burgeoning aspidistras. The slim leather folder was invisible among the clutter.

She put one ten back in her purse and the other on the table, weighing it down with the sugar bowl.

"There's what I owe Leroy," she said. "Does he always open other folks' things like he did my suitcase? And my car!"

"Lord," whispered Molly. "Yes, Carol. Can I call you Carol? Lord yes. Mail sometimes. Boxes that come for people. I don't know what all. I told him all it would take is just one complaint, and I'd lose the post office, and there'd go our income, just like that, but he don't care. He's got his hands in ever'thin'."

Carol didn't doubt it. Right now she could see him out the window, rifling the glove box. The trouble's in the engine, she said silently. In the engine.

Tinky tunk, tunky, came the sound from the attic. It went on, repeating a phrase over and over.

"Raccoon music," repeated Carol, listening. It was like the drip of water in a still pool, repetitious but changeable. Molly refilled their cups, and they listened to the tinky tunk, over and over.

The door slammed open. Leroy stood in the opening. "I can fix that easy," he said, his eyes fixed on the money on the table. "You want me to go ahead?"

"For another ten bucks, sure."

"Might cost you more than that. Might take me all day."

Carol opened her purse and showed him the other ten. "I've got this left, and that's it," she said. "If you want to do it for that, fine. Otherwise I'll have to call somebody to come tow me. Or get somebody to drive me into a bigger town where I can catch a bus." She kept her eyes on him, daring him.

"Leroy," Molly interjected. "Be nice. If you can fix the lady's car, fix it. Don't always be thinkin' how much you can get."

Leroy glared at both of them, started to say something, changed his mind, spat, and left. Molly got a mop from a corner and mopped up the spit from the floor. "I hate it when he does that," she said.

"Maybe I'd just better call the nearest town," Carol said. "I don't think he's going to. . . ."

"Oh, he'll fuss, he'll whine, then he'll do it," sighed Molly. "I never knew

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such a boy for bein' put on. I ask him to dig a little ditch back of the house to carry the rainwater off, you'd think I'd asked him to dig a tunnel from here to Denver. A year after he did it, he's still tellin' how hard he worked diggin' that ditch. One whole day it took. Only day in four years he's ever done anythin' around here." She got up and approached the stove. "Well, you goin' to be here awhile; I'll fix us some lunch."

"My birthday lunch," said Carol flatly. "I'm fifty years old today."

"Fifty. Lord, child. You're young yet. I hate to tell you how long ago I saw fifty. But, happy birthday anyhow."

Carol stood at the window, watching Leroy diddle with the engine. No point in being impatient. It wouldn't hurt to wait another hour or so. Molly moved from stove to refrigerator to sink. From the attic came repeated sounds. Tinky tunk. Tunkety tink tink. Tinky tinky tunk tunk tink. Then a crash, and silence. It reminded Carol of when she was young, taking piano lessons. She'd never been able to make the pieces sound like her teacher did. More than once she had slammed the piano shut in frustration, and it sounded just like that.

Leroy came into the house, went through into the hall, climbed the stairs.

"Lunch in a bit, Leroy," called Molly.

"I'm busy," he yelled. They heard him banging and clanging. Then he came to the doorway and said, "I need some help. I need some wire from up there, but there's this trunk in the way."

"Well, move it, Leroy."

"Can't," he said. "You come help."

Molly shook her head. "For heaven's sake." She turned the stove down. "Lunch is almost ready!"

"I'll do it," said Carol.

"What wire?" mumbled Molly, trailing along behind. They trailed single file up the ladderlike stairs: Molly, then Carol, then Leroy. The trapdoor was standing open, dust drifting from its edges. A high window at one gable end of the attic caught the pale light of autumn afternoon and lit the dust, tiny galaxies of it, spinning in the cold light.

"Over there," said Leroy impatiently. "By the post."

They followed his footprints toward a roughly squared post that supported the roof beam. Behind them the trapdoor slammed shut and then echoed again as the bolts were slapped home. Leroy made considerable

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noise going back down the stairs, as though he might have half-galloped, half-fallen.

"What?" cried Molly. "What?"

"I think he's locked us in," said Carol, calmly telling herself she should have known. Oh my, yes.

"Locked us in?" cried Molly. "Locked us in? Why?"

Carol thought about it. "I think he's locked us in so he can go through my purse," she said. "And my suitcase. And the rest of the stuff in the car. I guess he figures nobody with Kansas plates on her car would end up here in the middle of Colorado with only twenty bucks to her name."

"You mean he wants to rob you? Steal from you?"

Carol felt herself getting angry. "Well, for heaven's sake, Molly. You said he was all the time sneaking and getting into things. Why do you think he did that? Doesn't he steal? I'm sure he steals. He wouldn't have tried to open my suitcase otherwise. He just right out and did it. Of course he steals."

Tinky tunk, said a corner of the attic. Tinky tinky tunk tunk. Carol swallowed her rage and tiptoed toward the corner, where she peered over an old trunk.

At first she saw nothing. Then she saw the eyes. Then the whole animal, crouched there under the eaves. Masked face. Black button nose. Quick, eager little hands. Before it on the dusty boards of the floor were shapes it took her a moment to figure out. A cowbell. A dusty vase. A wooden box without a lid.

The raccoon reached out its paws. Tinky tunk, tinky tunk tunk, tinkety tunk. It made a gesture. Carol recognized the gesture. Irritation. Frustration.

Carol and raccoon stared at one another.

"I'll see what I can do," Carol said softly.

She went back to Molly, who was standing beside the post, staring up at the high window and weeping.

"After all I've done for him," she cried. "Fed him and clothed him and housed him for four years now, almost five. And here he had to go ruin your birthday lunch. I've got some real maple syrup my sister sent from Vermont, and I was goin' to make flapjacks."

They both heard the footsteps on the stairs at the same moment.

"Hey, lady," came Leroy's voice.

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"Yes?" said Carol.

"You got this book thing in your suitcase. Says you've got more'n a thousand dollars in the bank. I've got a proposition for you. You write me a check for that, I'll let you out of there. I got your car fixed already. Stopped-up fuel line was all it was."

Carol choked, swallowed, choked again. "You can't write checks on savings accounts," she said. "I have to go in there in person, to that bank or some other bank to arrange a transfer."

"You can't get it out on a check?" He sounded outraged. "Or some kinda letter?"

Of course I could, but I'm not going to. "No," she cried. "Only by going into the bank myself."

"Maybe if you'd give it to him, then he'd let us out, and we could go get the sheriff," whispered Molly. "You shouldn't have to spend your whole birthday in here. I never thought the day would come I'd call the sheriff on my own kin."

Carol listened to Leroy's steps, going away. "He's not your kin, Molly. He's your daughter's first husband's son. Tell me again, how did Leroy's father die?"

"He must've slipped on grease or something. He pitched headfirst right into a grease pit where he worked, at the garage. Broke his neck. Poor little Leroy was right there and saw it happen. My daughter says that's why he is like he is. He had a tromma. It's something like a fit."

Carol was exploring the dim room. Hanging on a nail high on the post was a glass cruet. She pushed a trunk against the post, mounted it, got down the cruet, and struck it with a fingernail. A pure, bell-like tone suffused the attic. In the corner, something whuffed impatiently. Carol struggled with the nail the cruet had been hanging on. It was only loosely inserted into a larger hole. In a minute she had it out.

"That's why I've never run Leroy off," sobbed Molly. "Because of that tromma he had."

"Excuse me," murmured Carol, taking the cruet over to the corner where the raccoon waited. She struck the cruet with the nail, then put both cruet and nail on the floor. She stood watching while the raccoon tested it.

Tinky tunk, tunk chime, thunky chunk chime, chunky thunk. The raccoon cocked its head, listened, then made the gesture again.

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"Well, at least it's an improvement," said Carol. "There's bound to be something else." She returned to Molly. From outside in the yard came the sound of her car engine revving, a rhythmic hrumm, hrumm.

"Molly, excuse me, but do you have any musical instruments up here?" Carol asked.

"Musical instruments? You mean like a guitar? Or harmonica?"

"Well, truthfully, I was hoping for something more like a marimba."

"What in heck's a marimba?"

"Like a piano. Only, you hit the keys with little hammers. Metal keys. Or maybe wooden ones."

"You mean a xylophone? There was a xylophone up here. It belonged to my grandbaby Louise. Got it for her when she was a little tiny thing. It had different color chimes, and a little book with different colors in it. You could play the colors and make a tune, you know?"

"Where would it be, Molly?"

"Oh gracious, I don't know. Haven't seen it in years. Maybe in that trunk. I put most of the babies' things in there. With my daughter's."

Carol tugged the trunk from under the slope of the roof and turned it to get at the latch. It creaked open, displaying a yellowed sheet beneath, and under that, piles of this and that, clothing and bedding and old letters.

"Down in the bottom," said Molly. "I 'member. I put the toys at the bottom."

They burrowed together, stopping at the sound of more footsteps on the attic stairs.

"Hey, lady," cried Leroy. "What I think is, I'll drive you down to Rocky Ford to the bank there, and you can get me the money there."

"Me and your grandmother," called Carol. "Both of us."

"Nah. Her, I'm gonna leave here, see, and this friend of mine, Buck Henry, he's gonna watch her, and if you don't get me the money, he's goin' to set the house afire."

"They learn it on TV," whispered Molly, tears in her eyes. "Such badness, and they learn it on TV."

"You think this Buck Henry would watch you?" Carol whispered back.

"I don't know. Buck might, maybe. He hangs around here a lot. He's pretty useless."

"Let me think it over," called Carol. "It's too late to go today, anyhow."

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"You're gonna get cold in there," Leroy cried. "Gets cold in there at night."

"I'll think it over," she repeated. After a time she heard his feet retreating, slowly this time.

She dug farther into the trunk. At the very bottom was the child's xylophone. Eight tones, in rainbow colors. She ran her fingers over them, making the ghost of a scale.

From the corner came an eager scuffling. She carried the xylophone over and shoved it into the corner. Behind the coon was a ragged hole in the floor, evidently the place he had come in through. He or she. Out of this hole peered another head, which withdrew when Carol set the instrument down.

She went back to Molly, hearing behind her a ghost of melody, tinky tunk, tinketty tunk tunk, chime.

"There's a piano in here, too," crowed Molly. "I forgot all about that!" It was a child's piano, made with a lyre of stiff wire inside, each wire making a single tone. Carol seized it and ran her fingers over the keys. Some of the linkages between the keys and the lyre were broken. As a piano, it made a good doorstop, but the wire lyre could make music.

Carol set her heel on the piano and shattered it.

Molly cried out in outrage.

Carol hugged her. "Sorry, Molly. But I need the insides of it." She lifted the lyre from the wreckage and stripped the clinging splinters away. It looked like one side of a fish bone, the individual wire ribs protruding from a wooden backbone. She carried it over and thrust it into the corner. This time the second coon did not depart, but sat looking at her watchfully.

"You'll need something to hit this with," Carol explained, striking the wires one by one with her fingernail. When she bent over to put down the lyre, she looked carefully at the hole the coons had come in through. It was too small to take either the piano lyre or the xylophone through. The hole could be enlarged, undoubtedly, but that would take time. Well, there'd be opportunity to think about that later.

The two women sat together. From the corner the tinks and tunks began to emerge into hummable melody, recognizable harmony.

"There," said Molly. "That's the tune they used to play on Pa's mandolin."

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"I don't understand why he didn't like it," mused Carol. "I find it very pleasant. Very soft and whispery. Sort of like wind, or water."

"Pa didn't like much," admitted Molly. "I think it was them being uppity made him mad."

"Uppity getting into the house?"

"Uppity making music. That's a human thing, you know. And I know what you said about the birds, but Pa would've said that was different. Animal's supposed to hunt for stuff to eat, and supposed to sleep in holes, you know. Animals are supposed to be wild and dangerous, eat you up in a minute. He always told me to stay away from coons. He said they were dangerous. Said they were all over. Said they seemed to think Coonyville belonged to them."

"I suppose they could be dangerous," Carol commented. "Some of them get pretty big, don't they?"

"Thirty, thirty-five pounds. They'll kill a dog. Even just one of 'em can do a man some damage."

Carol raised up and peered into the shadowed corner. She thought she heard two melodies being played simultaneously, and she was right. One had the sixteen-penny nail in a front paw and was using it like a little mallet; the other was using the flat of his little hand. Tinky tump, in counterpoint. The music rose and swirled, tiddly tiddly.

"Is that ladder in one piece?" Carol asked, pointing to a dusty shape hung on the rafters. "I want to look out that window."

It took both of them to get the ladder down and lean it against the gable end, where the high window was at least twelve feet off the floor. Carol scrambled up, scratching herself on a protruding nail, getting dust all over her face and head. At the top, she used her sleeve to rub the ancient glass clear. Below, in the yard, Leroy was talking to a hulking young man twice his size. Every now and then, the two of them would glance up toward the attic. The other young man was shaking his head, but Leroy was waving his arms as he pushed his mouth almost into the other's ear.

Something moved at the edge of the yard, where a dilapidated rail fence ran from a falling-down chicken coop toward the wreck of an old outhouse. Carol rubbed and stared. There were furry little forms all along the bottom of the fence, swaying in time to the music. Tinky tunk to the left, tunky tink to the right. Chime, rattle, bang.

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How could they hear it? The attic corner must make some kind of sounding box. Perhaps it was the space between two studs, acting like a whispering gallery. Whatever the structure that transmitted the sounds outside, the assembled audience was obviously hearing the music clearly. There were fifty or sixty of them out there. Some of them big ones. The one nearest the old outhouse looked to weigh a good deal more than thirty pounds. He stood on his hind legs from time to time, sniffing the air. Like a miniature bear.

Leroy left the other boy, went into the garage, then returned shortly carrying a gasoline can. Carol climbed down from the ladder thoughtfully.

"There's another man out there," she told Molly.

"Must be Buck Henry. His folks have a farm down the creek."

"There's a whole lot of raccoons out there, too," Carol remarked. "I read somewhere raccoons have the most sensitive hands of any animal, including man. Every one of their fingers has nerves that go to a separate place in the brain. If you could make a raccoon-sized piano, think what music they could make!"

From the corner, sudden silence.

"I suppose a person could hire someone to make a piano like that," she said. "One with real little tiny keys."

"I suppose you could," said Molly sadly. "What's that boy doing now?"

Carol sniffed. "He was talking to his friend. Then he got a gasoline can. I think he's brought in some gasoline in the house. I smell it. I think he's going to threaten us with burning the house down. Of course, if he does that, the piano will melt. So will the xylophone."

A hasty scuffling from the corner, a frantic banging.

"They won't go down that hole," said Carol in a conversational tone. "It's not big enough. As a matter of fact, I think the only thing that's going to save the piano and the xylophone is to get us out of here before Leroy sets fire to the house. He probably won't burn it if we aren't in it. The easiest way would be to get into the house downstairs, climb up the stairs, and somehow undo that bolt on the trapdoor. That would a real nice birthday present for me. Molly'd like it, too."

"I don't know what hole you mean," said Molly fretfully. "And I don't know how you think we're going to get downstairs. If we were downstairs, we wouldn't need to come upstairs and let ourselves out." She sounded tired and put out.

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The scuffling noises in the corner ceased.

"How did your daughter and her family get killed?" asked Carol, seating herself on the dusty trunk. "You were telling me about that."

"Oh. Well, they were coming to see me, as a matter of fact. Thanksgiving time. Leroy hadn't been feeling good, so he stayed home. And when the car got out on the highway, the brakes didn't work, and the car crashed and killed them all."

"How old was Leroy then?"

"He was fourteen. He'd dropped out of school already. His folks was real upset, but Leroy was real proud of hisself. He lied about how old he was and got a job down to the garage where his daddy worked before he died."

"But you didn't take Leroy in right then, after the accident."

"Oh no. They had foster homes. You know. He wasn't my kin, not really, so they didn't send him to me. Only, after all those accidents at those places they sent him, I guess they figured he was sure havin' bad luck, he might as well come to me."

Carol sniffed. The smell of gasoline was definitely stronger. "I suppose some of those places burned down?"

"One of 'em did, I think," said Molly. "One of 'em sure did. The one he was at last."

"What I'm gonna do," yelled Leroy through the door, "is, I'm gonna give you one more hour to think about it. Then, if you don't come with me to the bank, we're gonna burn this place and take your car."

"Leastwise he isn't threatenin' to rape you," said Molly. "On the TV, they always do that, too."

"You go on downstairs," cried Carol. "Let me think for just a few minutes."

They heard the kitchen door slam. Molly began to cry, slow, hopeless tears. Carol cuddled her and wiped her face. After a time they heard a rustle, a slither, a scratch and murmur. Then there was noise on the other side of the trapdoor, crunching and muttering. Something metallic screeched. Then silence.

Carol tiptoed to the trapdoor and raised it slowly. The gasoline can was sitting on the third step down.

Molly said from over her shoulder, "Now, wasn't that sensible of Buck Henry? Buck's got some sense; he just doesn't use it very often."

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Carol picked up the gasoline can in one hand and beckoned to Molly with the other. "Shhh," she said softly to Molly, then more loudly to the corner. "Of course, we've got to be sure Leroy never burns the house down so I'll have a place to send the piano with little tiny keys. He still could burn it down. I think somebody really has to stop him, that's all."

They crept down the stairs, through the dim storeroom into the post office, and out the post office door. Dragging Molly by one arm while repeatedly shushing her, Carol made her way down to the creek and around behind a row of bare willows, so thickly clustered at the bases that they could hide the two women from any but a close search.

There was no sound from the house for a long time. Buck Henry came around the corner of the building and stood looking fearfully up and down the road, fidgeting from foot to foot, like a man who had to go.

"What's he doin'?" Molly whispered.

"Trying to decide whether to get involved or not," said Carol. "He looks scared to me."

The sun was beginning to sink behind the crumpled horizon, when they heard a shout from the house, Leroy's voice raised in anger: "... I gave you plenty of time ... told you do what I say or else ... got to be here somewheres, and I'm gonna burn the whole damn place. ..."

Then he screamed, whether in pain or surprise, Carol couldn't tell.

At the sound, Buck Henry started and turned to face the house, his mouth open, his eyes white. Other screams followed the first one, and Buck turned and ran up the side of the road. He went on running, not looking back, until he vanished over the top of the hill where the "Welcome to Coonyville" sign was. During all that time, Leroy kept on screaming.

"Buck's sure in a hurry. What's Leroy yellin' about?" Molly wondered.

Leroy's voice had fallen away to a few muffled shrieks. "I think he's yelling at you, telling you he's decided to leave," said Carol.

"Oh Lord, don't I wish," the old woman sighed. "I really do wish."

"I think I heard him say something about the hell with it, he was going to California," said Carol.

"I don't know how he's gonna get there. Looked like Buck Henry was gonna run the whole way, but I didn' see Leroy goin' anywhere."

"Maybe they plan to meet up later. Why don't we just wait here until we're sure he's gone?"

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They sat, Molly half-reclining in the last of the sun, her eyes shut behind her glasses. Carol was facing the house, and it was only she who saw the flood of furry forms pour out of the post office door. She counted to eighty and then gave up. Some of them were real little ones, five and six in a row. Many of the furry forms were dragging things. Five big ones moved in a group, like soccer players, shoving something along the ground among them, like a soccer ball.

When they had gone, the music came again. Tinky tunk. Tinky tunk tunk, chime, bang. The sound floated clearly on the evening air. Tinky tunk chime bang.

Molly stretched and cocked her head, listening. "You know, now I'm really listenin' to that, it is kinda pretty. I don't know what Pa got so fired up about."

Carol patted the old woman. "I need to be getting on, Molly. Now that my car's fixed, I should start moving. I need to find a motel." She wanted a place to wash, a place to sleep. A place she could buy ice cream. "I'll just run on in and get my suitcase and things back in the car." Molly was moving slowly across the gravel as Carol went in through the post office door and let it slam shut behind her.

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There was remarkably little mess on the stairs or in the hall. Her savings book was on the bottom step, licked clean. A few tatters of blue-plaid shirt fabric lay crumped on the floor. In the kitchen she found everything she owned piled on the kitchen table, but her papers were all there, including the two ten-dollar bills. Her wallet was undisturbed, where she'd hidden it, among the aspidistras. She had everything folded and repacked by the time Molly came in.

"I went out to that room of Leroy's over the garage," said Molly, a little fretfully. "You must've been right about him leaving, but I can't figure why he didn't take his motorbike."

"He'll probably send for it," said Carol comfortingly. "Molly, I want you to do me a favor."

"Well, sure," said the old woman. "You've been real kind about all this. Not a very nice way to spend your birthday, but you didn't yell about Leroy even once. I think that's real polite, and I want you to know I appreciate it. I'll do anything I can."

"I've got to order this . . . this musical instrument, but I don't have anywhere to store it. What I'd like to do is, I'd like to have it sent here

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and have you store in out in your barn for me. Here's twenty dollars. When it gets here, have the delivery man put it in your barn. Have him unpack it, too. It isn't good for musical instruments to be crated up. Then you keep it for me, will you?"

"You some kind of musician?"

"Well, sure. Yes. That's right. It's just . . . I'm going to be moving around for a while, you know."

"Well, I'd be pleased to help any way I can."

"And Molly. . . ."

"Hmm."

"You won't mind the raccoon music, will you? I mean, it'll be kind of company for you."

"Oh sure. No, I won't get like Pa; you can count on that. I always did think he was a little silly about it. Why should he mind if they thought it was their place? They were here before we were." She cocked her head. "You sure you won't stay to supper? With it bein' your birthday and all. I could fry a chicken."

Carol gave Molly a hug. "No, I have to be moving on. But I'll write to you. Maybe you can come visit me when I get settled."

Outside in the yard, she put her warm coat on and dumped her suitcase on the backseat. The music was actually louder out here in the open than it had been in the attic. Evidently the structure of the house did act as a sounding board. The fence line was thronged with shadow shapes, crouched here, there, quietly listening to the concert.

She got into her car and put the key into the ignition, but didn't turn it. Instead she sat there with the car door open, being part of the audience. The sound was remarkable. Gentle. Relaxing. Molly would really enjoy hearing that, evenings.

At the corner of the outhouse, the biggest coon stood on his hind legs and interrupted the melody in a long, wild-animal voice.

A moment's silence; then the music changed to something more familiar.

Tinky tump-tump tink tink. (Chime.)

Tinky tump-tump tink tink. (Chime.)

Tinky tump-tump, dear Carol.

Tinky tump-tump to you.

She thought the big coon at the corner of the outhouse waved good-bye as she drove out, but it was too dark to be sure.

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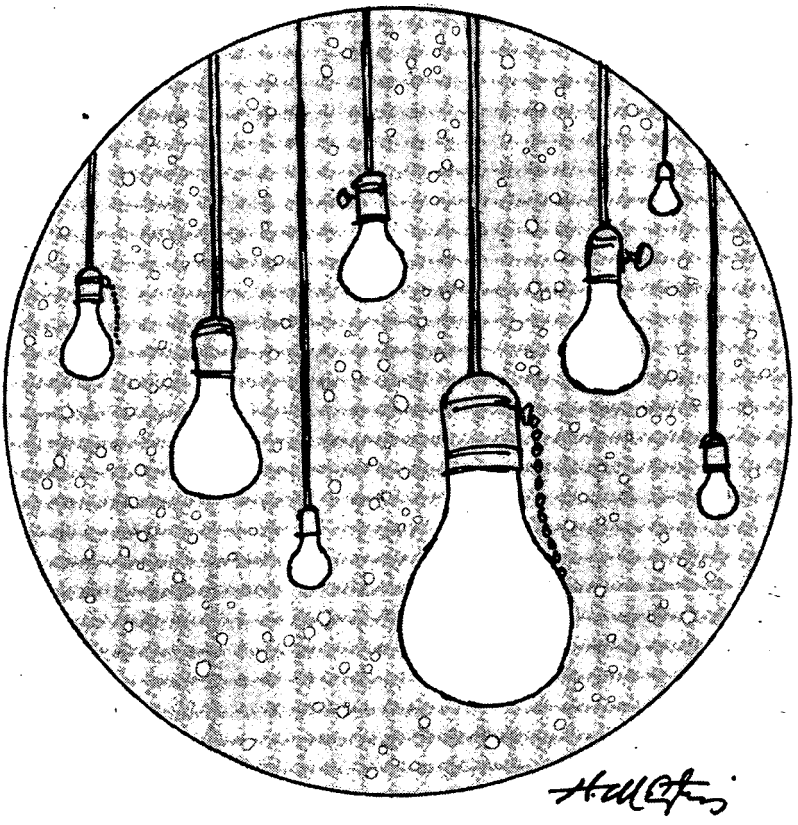

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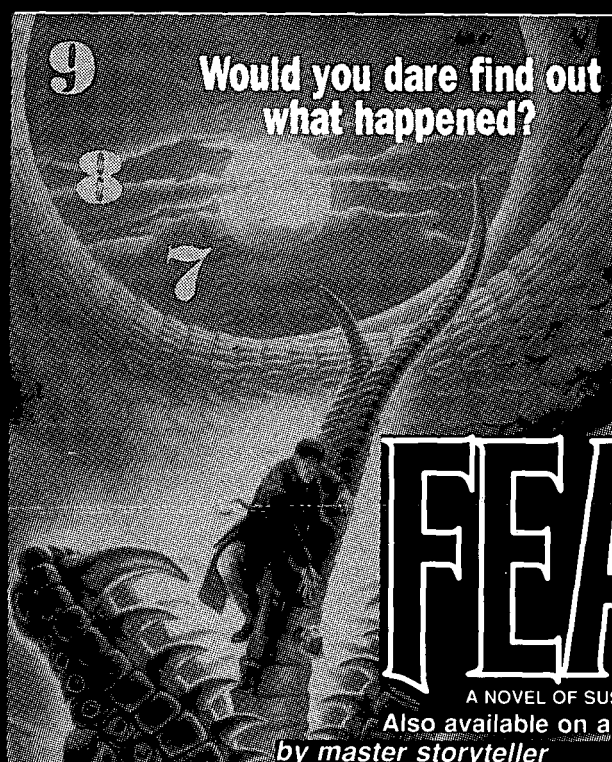
# What would you do if four hours of your life were suddenly missing?

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